The Image of the Leader: The Online Politics of Visuals and Memes

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KRISHANU BHARGAV NEOG

Centre for Political Studies

School of Social Sciences

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi- 110067

India

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Date: 30/12/2022

CERTIFICATE

I, Krishanu Bhargav Neog, hereby declare that this thesis entitled "**The Image of the Leader: The Online Politics of Visuals and Memes**", submitted by me to the Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is my original work. The thesis has not been submitted for any other degree to this university or any other university.

Krishanu Bhargav Neog

We recommend that the thesis be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Prof. Narender Kumar

(Chairperson)

Dr. Rajarshi Dasgupta

(Supervisor)

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List of abbreviations

AAP   Aam Aadmi Party

BJP   Bharatiya Janata Party

CM   Chief Minister

etc.   et cetera

Fig.   Figure

ibid.   ibidem

PM   Prime Minister

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INTRODUCTION

1 Introduction

This research investigates political articulations taking place through the new and widely used visual communicative practices online, such as selfies and memes. Specifically, this research takes up a particular genre of images that use the facial and bodily representations of popular political leaders such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi to stage socio-political commentary online. The internet, especially social media platforms, has emerged as a site for popular politicians such as the Prime Minister[1], leader of the opposition Rahul Gandhi, Delhi's current Chief Minister since 2012 Arvind Kejriwal and a host of others to establish their political presence and reach out to citizens through visual artefacts bearing their image. Such a visual presence is of political significance as online mobilisations happen around them. The rationale behind this particular direction of research is the argument that contemporary forms of populist politics has witnessed a 'personalization', and that political leaders often assume greater significance than policy decisions and ideologies. In addition, online collectives form around shared practices of image production, consumption, and circulation. As such, this research also proposes the investigation of such online collectives or 'networked public' that form around memes of political leaders. Beginning with Narendra Modi's advent to Twitter in 2009, such online mobilisations around the visual presence of these politicians have accelerated since the 2014 parliamentary elections. He is one of the many prominent contemporary politicians across the globe whose politics scholars have framed through the analytic category of populism. The deployment of social media platforms in operationalising this primarily mediated populism has been one of its hallmarks[2]. On the national level, scholars have described India's current political scenario to be one of 'competitive populism' (Sinha, 2017). Populism has proven well-suited to contemporary electronic media, especially news media. As we will see throughout, it is especially well-suited for social media platforms, with its promises of direct, intimate communication and emotionalised content.

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[1] The acronym 'PM' will be used in this thesis to refer to the Prime Minister who has won both the 2014 and 2019 elections

[2] Barr, R.R. (2009) 'Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics', *Party Politics*, 15(1), pp. 29–48. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068808097890.

On the other hand, visual communicative practices such as the production and circulation of memes by everyday users have become commonplace in online communications in the last few years. While ordinary users and political actors often deploy memes towards humorous and playful ends, they can be very easily repurposed for political commentary. Along with the rest of the world, digitally transformed images of popular political leaders have become a staple genre of memes in India, and memes of Modi, Kejriwal and Gandhi abound. The intersections of politics with popular cultures also make the digital images of these leaders an easily recognisable medium to disseminate socio-political commentary online. Memes are also often seen to stimulate memetic or textual responses, thus having the potential to influence political engagement online.

Several Indian leaders have made themselves ubiquitous in online spaces through sustained digital campaigns extending beyond elections. Images of India's Prime Minister Modi, for instance, are an integral part of his online presence. We find his official social media accounts widely disseminate his selfies and photographs with various world leaders and celebrities Photos of him are widely in circulation not only in the mainstream media but more importantly through his official social media accounts. The same applies, to different extents, to Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal.

Images of these leaders present themselves readily to be appropriated and manipulated by those who wish to posit a socio-political commentary through a variety of digital visual media artefacts such as internet memes, either celebrating or adopting a critical posture towards these leaders and their politics. 'Thug life' memes of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on YouTube, memes berating leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi, .jpeg memes that ridicule the PM's alleged penchant for being photographed, and many others abound in social media platforms. As the present times have witnessed a continuation of the 'personalization of politics' through political leaders in the online realm of not only presidential but also parliamentary political systems, the representations of political leaders have become popular currency for discussions as they are widely recognized. This personalization was a phenomenon consistently seen in mass media, especially during elections, in the past few decades[3]. The phenomenon has now transitioned into the internet as

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[3] See McAllister, I. (2007) 'The Personalization of Politics', in Dalton, R.J. and Klingemann, H.D. (ed.) *Oxford handbook of political behaviour*

political parties and the teams behind political leaders make great investments in maintaining the public social media accounts of political leaders.

Some of these mediated digital contents also direct criticism (or praise) at leaders. Several modes of expression, whether textual epithets or bodily metaphors, are often deployed in such mediated content online. The presence of user-generated images through photo-editing affordances takes centre-stage, as they serve as new means of political articulation criticising or praising these leaders. Humour is an effect intended by most memes, but there are subtle (and not so subtle) means by which inclusion and exclusion might occur through the humour of memes and by the other constituent modes of memes as well (Milner, 2013a).

1a Global, digital visual cultures

Visual representations of these leaders online are often enmeshed with global and local popular cultures; online visual artefacts are often created by juxtaposing elements drawn from popular culture with the images of these leaders, while such images themselves become part of popular culture (Milner, 2013b). Such visual artefacts can be categorised under the term 'produsage', formulated by Axel Bruns, as online content generated by the users themselves[4]. Users often deploy them in agonistic or antagonistic interactions online regarding contentious issues. We will see whether these digitally reproduced and transformed images retain the power seen in political iconography[5], given the playful ends towards which they are usually employed.

Scholars have argued that online 'publics' or collectivities can be formed around such endemic online practices (Boyd, 2011) as the production, circulation and consumption of memes, and such publics may assume political salience. The official social media accounts, profiles and handles of such political leaders disseminate images that speak to the power of the 'leader' with artefacts such as selfies and catchy hashtags, in the process mobilising populist publics. However, critical counter-publics may form with the appropriation of such online artefacts, treating the official output as a 'counter-archive' (Sinha, 2017).

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[4] Bruns, A. (2008) *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, New York: Peter Lang

[5] Müller, M.G. (2011) 'Iconography and Iconology as a Visual Method and Approach', in Margolis, E. and Pauwels, L. (ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, Sage.

1b The publics of political visuality

The conceptualisation of publics, whether offline or online, owes considerably to Nancy Fraser's re-formulation of the postulates put forward by Habermas in his 'Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere'. Instead of a homogenous, bourgeois public sphere, Fraser is insistent upon the existence of multiple 'publics', capable of deliberating upon issues that might have implications for a large majority of people but also often locked in conflictual relationships. A plurality of publics exists because it not possible to 'bracket' socio-economic differences, and this plurality is a structural condition rather than being a deviance in a liberal democracy. These 'publics' are overall beneficial to a democratic milieu. Fraser's principal preoccupation is the need to account for socio-economic hierarchies that results in differential access to 'publicity' of cultural expression, social identity etc. Fraser calls such public spheres that exist in opposition to the dominant, hegemonic bourgeois ones as 'subaltern counter-publics'. Such counter-publics can also be the sites of exclusion and discrimination themselves. Fraser classifies publics as 'weak' and 'strong' publics based on whether they merely present opinions or have decision-making powers (Fraser, 1990).

For some scholars, the internet is an extension of the public sphere where free, rational individuals engage in deliberation through inter-subjective language to arrive at a consensus on the truth. As discussed above, there exists a critique of the concept of public sphere for excluding the voices emanating from the margins. This critique posits the existence of 'counter-publics' which seems to have tremendous explanatory potential in the globalised communications sphere of the internet (Dean, 2003). Global networks of telecommunication which enable computer-mediated interaction among these pluralised 'publics' are usually considered 'universal, anti-hierarchical' that offer 'universal access, uncoerced communication'[6]. However, this sphere of the publics runs the risk of being a disavowed fantasy that co-constitutes the plane of modern informational and 'communicative' capitalism[7].

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[6] Buchstein, H. (1997) 'Bytes that Bite: The Internet and Deliberative Democracy', *Constellations, Vol. 4, No. 2*

[7] See Dean, J. (2001) 'Publicity's Secret', *Political Theory, Vol. 29, No. 5* , pp. 624-650. In this modern economy, production and circulation of cultural symbols, knowledge and affect occur alongside traditional agricultural and industrial output. As such there are constraints to the 'publicity' of the communicative field to ensure the secure production and circulation of commodities, constraints which predetermine what is and is not acceptable in this communicative field of politics. Thus, there exists a paradoxical situation

It remains a matter of debate whether the proliferation of communicative means such as social media platforms and chat messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram has engendered deliberative publics or has led to mobs and other riotous and violent collectives. Such collectives formed around images, especially morphed images, have led to a spate of riots in India in this decade, such as the Azad Maidan riots of 2012, the Pune riots of 2014 and the Muzaffarpur riots of 2015 (Narrain, 2017) (Udupa, 2017).

1c Images and Politics: South Asia

The political potency of mass-reproduced indigenous images at the point of reception in the South Asian context, however, has been noted by scholars of visual media (Pinney, 2004) (Jain, 2003). Such singular indigenous modes of aesthetic reception also occur through audiovisual technologies[8]. It can be argued that singular political insights can be drawn from the visual culture of online digital visuals such as selfies and memes bearing the facial or bodily representation of these leaders as well as the high volume of textual and visual commentary accompanying these artifacts in the 'comments' or 'posts' or 'Tweets' accompanying these images in social media platforms online as network publics form around these artifacts.

Images, especially the artwork in calendars, chromo-lithographs etc. that were mass-produced for circulation, were used to sneak in nationalist messages during British rule surreptitiously. To avoid proscription by the authorities, the makers of such images often took recourse to mythological and religious themes informed by Hindu motifs. Various semiotic resources were included in such images to support the nationalist cause, and the countenance and bodies of key figures in the freedom struggle, such as Tilak, Bhagat Singh, Subhash Chandra Bose and Gandhi were often featured in such images. The government inadvertently drew attention to such themes

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where more openness of the internet is strived for at the same time as more and more security measures for identifying and tracking actors are put in place. The paradoxical relation between publicity and secrecy can be observed at the very inception of the 'public sphere' in Enlightenment Europe, as noted by Reinhart Koselleck. These free, rational spaces were actualized as apolitical, ritualized and cultural spaces inside secret societies like the Freemasons which protected them from the vagaries of the absolutist state. See also Dean, J. (2004) 'The Networked Empire: Communicative Capitalism and the Hope for Politics', in Passavant, P. and Dean, J. *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, Routledge and Dean, J. (2005) 'The Real Internet', *International Journal of Žižek Studies, Vol. 4, No. 1*

[8] See Brosius, C. (2003) 'Hindutva Intervisuality: Videos and the politics of representation', in Ramaswamy, S. (ed.) *Beyond Appearances: Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, Sage Publications

through the very act of proscription and attempts to control the flow of information through such mass-produced visual artifacts. Christopher Pinney argues that as the British authorities wised up to these illicit informational flows, the makers of such images, in an attempt to evade the scrutiny of the state, moved from semiotic components to 'figural' ones that sought to evoke strong affective intensities through the images of nationalist leaders through particular usages of colours, certain brushstrokes and so on. The makers often portrayed the bodies of these leaders involved in sacrificial gestures towards the deified 'Bharat Mata' (especially of those that were executed by the British, such as Bhagat Singh), while street art imbued others with auratic overtones often reserved for gods and goddesses (Pinney, 2004).

Pinney, drawing from Ariella Azoulay's notion of the 'civil contract of photography', also points towards the capacity of photographic images to cause great anxiety in the powers that be. During the Indian freedom struggle, Pinney notes, photographic images were utilised by both the Indian National Congress and the British regime as justifications for their respective stances and actions. The INC documented atrocities committed by the security forces of the British government in places such as Jallianwala Bagh through photographic evidence. The British government attempted to restrict access to such sites by photographers and in turn often attempted to capture what it considered unruly actions by crowds to justify police action (Pinney, 2019).

A more contemporary research into the power and potency of imagistic portrayal of an Indian political leader can be found in M. S. S. Pandian's work on the cinema actor and former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. G. Ramachandran, popularly known as MGR. Pandian meticulously reconstructs the socio-economic and cultural processes that went into the conflation of MGR's on-screen persona as a subaltern 'hero' representing the everyday downtrodden Tamil masses with his real-life political persona[9].

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[9] See Pandian, M.S.S. (2015) *The image trap: MG Ramachandran in film and politics*, SAGE Publishing India. Pandian deploys Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'commmon sense' as the conceptual framework that can best analyse the popularity of a leader whose imagistic portrayal as a savior of the sub-altern masses through his cinematic roles as an actor and certain populist measures as a politician eclipsed the actual actions of his regime, actions which were often inimical to the interests of the sub-altern classes. Popular narratives about MGR. which Pandian calls 'constructed biographies' or 'popular biographies', often dovetailed phases of his real life with his roles as an actor that portrayed him as one of the subaltern classes that fight the oppression of the upper classes and upper castes and emerges victorious. For instance, the fact that he sprung from humble roots and led a life of deprivation as a child are collapsed with his cinematic roles as someone from an under-privileged background who overcomes nigh insurmountable odds. There were subtle semiotics at play in MGR's roles as an actor in this imagistic

1d Images and Politics: A history of vilification

Images, pictures, visual culture and practices in general seem to exercise considerable control over human beings. For W.J.T. Mitchell, images are beings with desires, the desire to reverse places with the human viewer and assume the corporeality of 'flesh and blood' by 'transfixing and enthralling' the viewer. In the case of the famous 'Uncle Sam wants you' US Army recruiting poster and the meat-packing businessman on whom it was based Mitchell says, "the disembodiment of his mass-produced image is countered by its concrete embodiment as picture in recruiting stations (and the bodies of real recruits) all across the nation"[10]. Such a relation of corporeality is decried in mediated communication of modern times. In European aesthetic judgment, such corporeal 'taste of sense' has been considered inferior to the detached, dispassionate 'taste of reflection'. However, in other zones of mass circulation of images, such as the ubiquitous calendar art based on religious iconography in India, the full-frontal gaze of the deity, accentuated by an emphasis on 'disproportionately large eyes and face' (Jain, 2003, p. 49) (Jain, 2007, p. 46) is a necessity to ensure the devotee can have access to the *darshana* of the deity (Jain, 2007). There is thus, stress laid upon the need for a corporeal relationship with images. The cult value of such 'calendar art' is retained through its ritualistic associations even though it circulates in the public realm as a commodity (Jain, 2003, p. 53).

Political thinkers since the time of Plato have looked askance at the role and possible implications of images in politics. Plato castigated the 'idols of the mind' as appealing to the 'low elements in the mind'. Marxism has a tradition of portraying imagistic metaphors in a negative light, beginning from the 'German Ideology' where Marx wrote that ideology presents an inverted image of reality, rather like a *camera obscura*. Images and imagistic thinking has been cemented in place as a 'lesser faculty' as compared to linguistic thought processes in much of political theory. According to W. J. T. Mitchell, idolatry is a charge often levelled upon those considered to possess 'epistemological error and moral depravity' by traditions of thought that portray

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construction that translated very well into the political realm. His fight sequences, involving folk martial arts, exuded a power not often available to those at the receiving end of social oppression. He often appropriated symbolic resources that were often the exclusive domain of the upper echelons of society, such as certain styles of clothing and education/literacy. All of this contributed to a particular personalized political image that managed to trump policy issues and yielded rich electoral dividends over a career spanning decades

[10] See Mitchell, W.T. (2005) *What do pictures want?: The lives and loves of images.*, University of Chicago Press

themselves as iconoclastic (Mitchell, 2005). The nature of images has often aroused suspicion and apprehension in Enlightenment thinkers, from Francis Bacon (to destroy 'the idols of the mind') (Simons, 2006) to the critiques of 'fetishism' drawn from colonial encounters with religious practices in West Africa (as traced by William Pietz)[11].

The school of thought propounded by Jurgen Habermas considers images to be part of the systemic distortion of rational deliberative mechanisms in the public sphere brought about by modern media conglomerates. The potential for discussion on matters of common good in the public sphere is enervated by a mass media that designs its products for mass consumption rather than critical reflection, and appealing mass-mediated images is an instantiation of such products being advertised. As Habermas puts it:

> 'Publicity loses its critical function in favor of a staged display; even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one can not respond by arguing but only by identifying with them'(Habermas, 1999)

Political organisations attempt to emulate mass media strategies and adopt advertising and product placement techniques.. In this process, substantive policy discussions are replaced by shallow imagistic products and personalised politics designed only to be attractive. Habermas submits that the only hope of amelioration of this state of affairs lies in deliberation as rational speech and a shift away from imagiastic politics (Simons, 2000).

Not everyone considers the transformation of citizens and voters to consumers and politics as an imagistic product to have a deleterious effect on a democratic setting. Margaret Scammell considers the role of image in politics to be linked to the 'the reputation, trustworthiness and credibility of the candidates or parties'. Voters as consumers are free to choose from these competing images of parties and candidates as governance service providers. Image trumps ideologies or policy packages as the principal determining factor. Scholars have posited that this state of affairs is not without democratising values. For those who have little time to engage in 'rational deliberation' or pursue lengthy tomes such stylised and personalised content open

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[11] See Pietz, W. (1985) 'The problem of the fetish I', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 5-17.

avenues to engage their 'emotional intelligence' in making political judgments. Images also allow for content to reach a wider audience (Simons, 2000).

As this thesis is occupied with the figure of the leader in images and politics centred around it, an engagement with populism is necessary along with the discussion on images and politics. This is also necessitated by scholastic commentary on current trends in Indian polity. In this chapter, we begin with a conceptual history of populism and the different approaches to study this phenomenon. As we progress through this thesis it will become more and more apparent why populism is an essential part of this research.

1e Populism and the internet

Long before social media platforms were existed, there were murmurs and discussions regarding the potential of the internet to be a hotbed of populism. The internet would do away with the influence of political parties and 'political elites', a school of thought opined in the 1990s[12].While political parties may have been forced to adjust to public politics in the social media age, there have also been 'digital' parties in Europe that were born on the internet and then became serious electoral contenders[13]. But the point on 'political elites' has proven to be prescient to a certain extent ('elites' as a concept often carries vague-ness). Populist leaders can now directly communicate with their followers and the voters on social media platforms, without the editorial oversight of mass news media over their message. Social media platforms operate in an attention economy, and so populist leaders can apply any 'style' of messaging to reach the electorate, with might constitute of simplistic, reductive bytes which gain a lot of 'eyeballs'(Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson, 2017). They can stage performances that carry a lot of emotional heft, which helps such content thrive in the online attention economy.. We will discuss more on the compatibility of populism and social media platforms in the next chapter along with the discussion on 'style', and we will see this in operation in Chapter III and Chapter IV.

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[12] See Bimber, B., 1998. The Internet and political transformation: Populism, community, and accelerated pluralism. *Polity*, *31*(1), pp.133-160
[13] See Gerbaudo, P., 2018. *The digital party: Political organisation and online democracy*. Pluto Press

2 Populism: A conceptual history

The corpus of scholarly works on populism has largely mapped the term's historical trajectory through its semantic and rhetorical (and increasingly pejorative) application. This has especially been the case with scholars working on its conceptual history. Conceptual historians consider politics and political action to be constituted through categories and units of language[14]. A term such as populism is understood in relation to other political concepts such as 'democracy', 'people', and the worldly processes and entities it refers to and the normative dimension attached to such terms[15]. This research and literature review shall follow the sequential classification made in the vital scholastic engagements with populism. The political thought that has gone into the more recent definition and thinking on populism is still largely preoccupied with conceptualising through language, as will become evident in the course of this discussion.

'Populism' draws its etymological roots from the Roman 'populus', which quite appropriately stood for 'people'. After the political revolutions in the United States and France in the 18th century, the word 'people' increasingly became the bearer of two meanings. On the one hand, it came to connote a mass of unruly denizens who had the potential to upend the status quo. On the other hand, the 'people' were viewed warily as the foundation on which the legitimacy of democratic politics was grounded. The very first cauldron of political ferment from whence the reference to populism is made in modern political history is with regard to the American Populist Party in the late 19th century. The Populist Party was built on the political disenchantment of landed farmers as well as workers who had borne the economic brunt of the American Civil War[16]. The People's Party was presented as a party of the 'plain people' who could regain control over the government, an alternative to the Democratic and Republican Parties, which were allegedly in the thrall of the 'financiers'. The dichotomy between a 'common' or a 'plain' people and a wealthy 'elite' class is already in view here. The term 'populist' was thought of as a descriptor for the Party and its adherents by a leader of the party, who wanted a term similar to 'Republican' or 'Democrat' that could be easily remembered and used in conversation. The term was also used by the American

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[14] Farr, J. 'Understanding conceptual change politically' in: Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge,

[15] Skinner, Q. (1989), 'Language and Political Change', in: Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge

[16] Hicks, J. (1931), *The Populist Revolt. A History of Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party*, Greenwood Press, Westport

press of the time to malign the Party and its followers for the demagoguery of their leaders and their 'anti-intellectual' stances (Houwen, 2012).

Scholars have also used the term 'populism' in relation to the Russian 'narodnichestvo' movement of the 19th century. The term 'narod' translates roughly as 'people' or 'nation' from Russian, and the intelligentsia associated with the movement called themselves 'narodniki'[17]. 'Narodnichestvo', although referring to a 'people', was almost wholly led by an intellectual class who started taking up residence in rural Russia among peasants. It was a form of agrarian socialism that valourised the traditional communal life of Russian peasants, and sought to locate a political revolution through the life-world and worldview of the peasantry. The movement sought to bypass the question of capitalist development of the Russian economy. The peasantry, however, did not take to these views. The Tsarist regime hounded these intellectuals and students, especially as the peasants did not wish to rebel against the Tsar (Canovan, 1981). Later, a splinter group of the movement took to insurgent activities. Latter Marxists such as Lenin criticised these attempts to establish socialism without the development of a capitalist mode of production[18].

The inter-war years did not see a significant volume of output on populism. After the Second World War, populism was picked up with renewed interest by those such as Edward Shils and Seymour Lipset in the context of McCarthyism. Their analysis was not restricted to McCarthyism, however, and took under its ambit fascism, Nazism, Bolshevism, authoritarianism and even Peronism (among others). Both Shils and Lipset conceived of populism as a dangerous trend that imperils liberal democracy. Shils defined populism as:

> 'It [populism] exists where there is an ideology of popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a long-established, differentiated ruling class, which is believed to have a monopoly of power, property, breeding and culture.' (Shils, 1996)

This definition serves as an augury for the conceptualisations of populism that have followed in recent years. In populism, for Shils, the 'people' are considered the fount from which political

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[17] Pipes, R. (1964), 'Narodnichestvo: A Semantic Inquiry', *Slavic Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3,
[18] Berlin, I, Hofstadter, R, McRae D. et.al (1968), 'To define populism', *Government and Opposition*, nr. 3

authority should rightfully emerge rather than elected representatives. The people are superior to politicians, bureaucrats, elites (financial or otherwise) and intellectuals. As Shils himself puts it:

> 'Populism is tinged by the belief that the people are not just the equal of their rulers; they are actually better than their rulers and better than the classes – the urban middle classes – associated with the ruling powers.' (Shils, 1996, p. 101)

Lipset considers populism to be an 'irrational protest ideology' championed by those who have seen a decline in their social and material standings. Democracy, for Lipset, is at antipodes with populism. Lipset looked beyond North America to also take into account Latin American populists of the time, such as Getulio Vargas of Brazil and Juan Peron of Argentina. Lipset detected a strain of 'anti-parliamentarism' in Peronist politics that consigned parliamentary politicians to the role of the corrupt. In the populist politics of Peron 'the power of the party and the leader is derived directly from the people' (Lipset, 1960).

In the 1960s, there arose a need to establish some conceptual clarity on populism. This drove Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner to call for a conference on populism at the London School of Economics. The conference had 43 participants and produced an edited volume in 1969, titled 'Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics'. It looked at agrarian populism in Russia and the US at the end of the 19th century, populism in Latin America in the 20th century and populism in post-colonial nations in Africa and Asia in the 20th century (Houwen, 2011). Distinctions were made between 'false populism', which merely uses populist exhortations against others to create a regime of elites, and 'populism proper', which is anti-hierarchical and anti-aristocracy. The 'elite' emerges as a crucial counter-concept standpoint to the 'people', which is concluded to be akin to 'Das Volk', rather than the working class[19]. This volume also laid the foundations for theoretical forays into modernisation theory and other developmentalist theories in the period preceding its publication. Populism was seen as a result of mass politics, an emergent middle class and raised expectations in post-colonies[20]. 'Liberal populism' was distinguished from 'national populism'. Others considered populism to be a deviation from the path laid down towards modernisation[21].

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[19] See Berlin, I, Hofstadter, R, McRae D. et.al (1968), 'To define populism', *Government and Opposition*, nr. 3
[20] See Di Tella, (1965), 'Populism and Reform in Latin America', Claudia Veliz (ed.), *Obstacles to Change in Latin America*, Oxford UP, London
[21] See Germani, G. (1978), *Authoritarianism, Fascism and National Populism*

Margaret Canovan and Ernesto Laclau were the principal theorists of populism in the late 1970s and the 1980s[22]. Both eschewed approaches that sought to establish a list of populism's core characteristics that defined populism; Laclau considered erroneous the approach that sought to build a generalised theory of populism based on existing examples while Canovan took a descriptive, phenomenological approach. In the 1990s, when the most impactful scholars were starting to release their literature, research was focused on the emerging radical right-wing parties in Europe and the neo-populists in Latin America (Moffitt, 2016).

The dominant modes of research and definition of populism are:

2a Populism as ideology

The research agenda of the approach that treats populism as an ideology or a 'set of ideas' is to subject the literature, such as manifestoes and texts bearing internal policy and stand-points, generated by political parties considered populist. While qualitative content analysis of texts produced by political parties has been the dominant choice, there have also been innovations with regard to computer-aided textual analysis (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013). This treatment of populism as a 'set' of ideas is exemplified by the definition provided by Cas Mudde, which is arguably the most widely used:

> 'a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004)

Mudde borrows from the works of Michael Freeden's work when he refers to populism as 'thin-centered' ideology. Here, again, we see the central role accorded to the role of language in the conception and operationalising of populism. Ben Stanley, another scholar who espouses Freeden's 'morphological approach to ideology' in explaining populism, stresses the fact that ideas exist in a dialectical relationship with socio-historical circumstances. In addition, such ideas can have concrete 'material' effects that impacts 'political outcomes'. Drawing from Freeden, Stanley states 'if ideas are individual interpretations, ideologies are interpretive frameworks that emerge as a result of the practice of putting ideas to work in language as concepts' (Stanley, 2008). Political ideologies

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[22] Laclau's work is discussed in detail in the section on studying populism as a discourse

are the resultants of coalesced experiences that are reflexively pushed into the public sphere. While the referents of such ideologies may shift diachronically they do have an 'ineliminable' cache of concepts that persist.

Now, unlike full-fledged ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism and socialism, populism (and nationalism, feminism and environmentalism) is a 'thin-centered' ideology in that it does not have 'contain particular interpretations and configurations of all the major political concepts attached to a general plan of public policy that a specific society requires'. It fails to provide 'a solution to questions of social justice, distribution of resources, and conflict-management which mainstream ideologies address' (Freeden, 1998). Populism, therefore, requires the scaffolding of an ideology such as conservatism or socialism to be operationalised. This, however, does not mean that populism is a dispersed, incoherent, catch-all concept; populism has been put into action based on 'popular sovereignty' as being derived from a 'people' (which Margaret Canovan considers to be a 'foundational myth' of representative democracies), often pushing back against the formalised, institutional structures indispensable to modern democracies. Indeed, deriving legitimacy through an invocation of the 'people' is specific to, but not restricted to, populism (Stanley, 2008).

Both Mudde and Stanley have based their scholarship on Europe and North America. Mudde attempts to situate populism beyond the usual attributes of demagoguery, opportunism, charismatic leadership, direct communication between leadership etc. He focuses instead on the Manichean *weltanschauung* of populism (a strong sense of the 'friend-foe' distinction) and its moralism (Mudde, 2004). Mudde also situates populism squarely within democratic electoral politics; rather than striving for qualitative change a-la a Marxist revolution, populism aims at reform. Another important distinction that Mudde stresses is the fact that populism lacks a 'class character'[23]; the 'way of life' of the amorphous, ambiguous category of the 'people' is sought to be made dominant. Populist parties are not opposed to electoral procedure, but are 'anti-party' to the extent that they are opposed to 'establishment' political parties (Mudde, 1996).

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[23] Mudde argues as follows regarding populism and socialism: 'Indeed, Simon Clarke has argued that Marxism–Leninism is essentially populist, while Ernesto Laclau called socialism 'the highest form of populism'. See Simon
Clarke, 'Was Lenin a Marxist? The Populist Roots of Marxism-Leninism', in Werner Bonefeld and Sergio Tischler (eds), *What is to Be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the Question of Revolution Today*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 44–75; Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism–Fascism–Populism*, London, New Left Books, 1977, p. 196'.

The limitations of this approach lie in its oft-noticed, implicit dependence on other approaches, such as the discursive one, when studying concrete cases. In works on radical right-wing populism in Europe there has also been a propensity to cite the characteristics of the host ideology as that of populism eg. Nativism (Moffitt, 2016).

2b Populism as a discourse

Scholars who have vouched for this approach recognise the need to go beyond programmatic political literature put out by political parties and look at the more discursive output of populist actors, such as the rhetorical resources mobilised by populist leaders. Populism is more than just a set of ideas; it is a mode of 'political expression' deployed not just by populist actors but actors from across the political spectrum (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013). As Kirk A. Hawkins, whose research on Hugo Chavez's populism is an exemplar in this area, argues '[populism] lacks the official texts and vocabulary that accompany an ideology, and must be discerned through more diffuse linguistic elements such as tone and metaphor and by a search for broad themes' (Hawkins, 2010). This approach takes up speeches and the public discourse on politics as data and subjects them to interpretive textual analysis (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013).

The scholars who follow the discursive approach also consider populism's Manichean outlook; there are clear-cut distinctions between 'good' and 'evil', 'friend' and 'foe' (for instance, Chavez called his opponents 'un-patriotic). Scholars have also detected an attitude of 'anything goes'; liberal democratic processes (that may enshrine pluralism, minority rights etc.) may be willfully flouted to actualise the will of the good and virtuous people. This approach departs from the ideological one at the point where it is stressed that

> 'But unlike an ideology, populism is a *latent* set of ideas or a worldview that lacks significant exposition and "contrast" with other discourses and is usually low on policy specifics. It has a subconscious quality that manifests itself primarily in the language of those who hold it' (Hawkins, 2009)

Another significant difference between the ideological and the discursive approach is that while the ideological approach considers populism to be an 'either-or' question (a political actor is either populist or not) the discursive approach considers populism to be a spectrum (a political actor is more or less populist at an instance of time). This non-dichotomous approach makes it possible to detect populist rhetoric being deployed by liberal, socialist and conservative political actors

(Moffitt, 2016). Rhetoric and discourse are closely intertwined in the discursive approach, and propel political action. Policy actions taken by populist actors are not considered populist for their content but because they are ascribed a particular meaning by participants. The populist discourse arises from the subconscious social collection of shared meanings (Hawkins, 2009).

The most significant contributions to this approach, however, have come from Ernesto Laclau. What set him apart from other theorists is his decision not to focus on a substantiation of the concept populism through a list of concrete characteristics. The heterogeneity in the manifestations of populism greatly reduced the ability of such definitions to be comprehensive, as the exceptions to such lists of definitional characteristics were far too numerous. Laclau instead located populism as an underlying political logic of the 'political' as such, coming into being through the 'antagonism' between two opposing groups (such as the 'people' and the elite') (Laclau, 2005b). Although at first locating such groups within the ambit of a 'class', Laclau has moved away from such an understanding and argues that populist politics 'can start from any place in the socio-institutional structure' (Laclau, 2005a).

The presence of the 'people' in a discourse is not enough for it to be populist:

> 'the presence of popular elements in a discourse is not sufficient to transform it into a populist one. Populism starts at the point where popular democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc' (Laclau, 1977)

The concretisation of this populist action takes place through a 'demand' (for recognition or redistribution). When a government/ruling class/'elite' manages to satisfactorily deal with the litany of demands that emerges from various socio-economic demographics, there is no possibility of an antagonism forming that would fracture the social body. Laclau calls this the 'logic of difference'. The 'logic of equivalence', on the other hand is formed when a number of such 'demands' remain unsatisfied. Such demands might then concatenate to form a 'chain of equivalence'. One of these demands contingently becomes the 'nodal point' around which the meaning of other demands is determined relationally (Laclau, 2005b). 'Floating signifiers' such as 'equality', 'justice' etc. are determined by this nodal point. Through the 'logic of equivalence' antagonism and thus populism arises between social groups, the 'people' and the 'elite' (Laclau, 2005a).

Laclau stresses upon the 'doing' or on the practice of politics (Moffitt, 2016). Socio-political actors are not pre-existing entities, and come into being through political practice. The performance of a

populist leader is necessary for the 'naming' of a 'people', for a 'people' to come into being (through interpellation by the leader). Laclau's approach has also pushed the study of populism to look beyond language alone[24], to look at performance (Laclau, 2005b).

Some critical scholars have raised concerns over Laclau's later conceptual moves through which he posited that all politics is populist. In what has been called a 'formalist' move Laclau no longer considers 'the people' to be the nodal point par excellence; the position of this nodal point can be taken up by any number of 'empty signifiers'[25] (Laclau, 2005b). This approach runs the risk of losing 'the conceptual particularity of populism as a tool for concrete political analysis'[26]. In addition, an overabundance of focus on the signifying and discursive properties of populism is often accompanied by a concurrent lack of attention to the crucial aspect of affect/passion in populism (Stavrakakis 2004). On the other hand, Moffitt marshals counter-examples to Laclau's claim that all politics is populist as such. He cites the cases of the Mexican Zapatistas, the Occupy movements and the Spanish 'indignados' as political mobilisations that actively avoid articulating their collectivity through an interpellating leader (as well avoiding other elements of populist discourses) (Moffitt, 2016).

2c Populism as political strategy

In contrast to the approaches discussed so far, Latin America rather than Europe or North America provides the grounding for the approach that looks at populism as a political strategy. This approach takes as its data the political party systems and structures of a polity, social movements, and

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[24] ' By 'discursive' I do not mean that which refers to 'text' narrowly defined, but to the ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble that constitutes a society as such. The discursive is not, therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive with the social as such. This means that the discursive does not constitute a superstructure […] or, more precisely, that all social practice constitutes itself as such insofar as it produces meaning'. See E. Laclau, 'Populist rupture and discourse', *Screen Education*, 34 (1980), pp. 87–93.

[25] 'the concept of populism that I am proposing is a strictly formal one, for all its defining features are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation—the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic—independently of the actual contents that are articulated' See Laclau, E. (2005) 'Populism: What's In a Name?', in Panizza, F. (ed.) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, Verso. Pp - 86

[26] 'to ask oneself if a movement is or is not populist is, actually, to start with the wrong question. The question that we should, instead, ask ourselves, is the following: to what extent is a movement populist?' 'A movement or an ideology—or, to put them both under their common genus, a discourse—will be more or less populistic depending on the degree to which its contents are articulated by equivalential logics' See E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), pp - 112

especially populist leaders. It conducts case studies and comparative historical analysis upon them (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013).

It is essential to chart the course of Latin American populism to discuss this approach. Latin America has remained a fertile hotbed for populism since the middle of the last century. Beginning with the end of the Second World War, Latin American countries bore witness to increasing migration to urban areas, and demands for jobs, services and infrastructure saw a rise. Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) (which initially yielded positive results) was the mainstay of economic policy-making during this period, often called the 'classical populism' period, which saw socio-economic 'modernisation' as well. Lasting through the 1960s, this phase of populism saw leaders such as Juan Peron and Getulio Vargas winning the confidence of 'multi-class' voter alliances[27]; in addition to urban working classes, these populist leaders also sought to bring into the fold middle classes and the peasantry. The political leadership was characterised by demagoguery and personalization (Weyland, 2001). However, the failures of ISI caught up with these countries, and through the 1970s-80s the region saw many military dictatorships. The neoliberal era beginning in the 1980s saw the gradual erosion of the organised urban working class. Urban migration continued, however, and there now was a burgeoning unorganised sector of informal workers whose redistributive demands had to be satisfied. These led to the rise of 'neo-liberal' populists such as Alberto Fujimori of Fiji. Later, leaders such as Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales[28] of Bolivia heralded a spell of left-wing populism in Latin America in the 21st century. Neo-populism draws its supporters in Latin America from the urban poor, as it promises to address issues of stark inequality that affect them (Weyland, 1996; Roberts, 2007).

The erstwhile dominant trends in studying Latin American populism involved theories of development, modernisation, dependency theory etc. that drew its impetus from socio-economic structures, such as state-led protectionist policies and welfare regimes that catered to the demand of the 'multi-class' alliance voters. The politics was almost considered epiphenomenal. However, the

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[27] See Drake, P. W. (1982). 'Conclusion: Requiem for Populism?' In M. Conniff (ed.), *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective*. Albuquerque, NM University of New Mexico Press and Conniff, M. (1982). 'Introduction: Toward a Comparative Definition of Populism'. In M. Conniff (ed.), *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
[28] Evo Morales's MAS party is an instance of an ethno-populist party that has as its base, in addition to the usual urban informal labour sector, an alliance of many ethnic, indigenous groups. This has become possible because of low inter-ethnic polarization in Latin America. See Madrid, R. L. 2008. 'The rise of ethnopopulism in Latin America'. *World Politics*, Vol. *60*(3), pp. 475–508

rise of neo-populist leaders in the 1990s happened in a context where the old redistributive regimes were no longer in place, but the personalistic, paternalistic style of populist leadership was still in vogue. Hence, scholars were forced to interrogate the older 'cumulative' theorisation that aggregated characteristics of different Latin American regimes considered populist. The autonomy of the political sphere was pushed to the forefront. More 'radial' definitions were formulated; politics that possessed all the attributes associated were considered fully populist whereas those that partially fulfilled them were considered sub-types[29]. The definition of populism was to be grounded in politics.

As the populist regimes had very divergent economic agendas, it was felt necessary to find a definition of populism that takes into account that it is often a 'specific way of competing for or exercising political power'. Populism determines the 'pattern of political rule'. In addition, populist politics has the distinction of 'friend or foe' built into it that is operationalised by populist leaders (Weyland 1996These larger-than-life, personalistic leaders evoke intense participation by followers with whom they seek unmediated contact so that the leaders may act as their 'saviour' from peril and lead them towards a glorious future. Thus, it is the political strategy of populist leaders that justifies the label of populism attached to a political movement or regime[30], rather than socio-economic conditions or policy decisions. Taking political strategy of populist leaders into account, populism can be defined as:

> 'as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers' (Weyland 1996)

There have been comparative studies involving Europe and Latin America that have taken forward attempts at redefining populism along the lines of political strategy of populist leaders[31]. Such

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[29] Roberts's definition of populism as a radial concept had five characteristics: 1) personalistic and paternalistic leadership; 2) a heterogeneous, multi-class political coalition; 3) a top-down process of political mobilisation that...bypasses institutionalised forms of mediation; 4) an amorphous or eclectic ideology and 5) an economic project that utilizes widespread redistributive or clientelistic methods. See Roberts, Kenneth M. "Neoliberalism and the transformation of populism in Latin America: the Peruvian case." *World politics* 48, no. 1 (1995): 82-116.

[30] The political style that is ascribed to populist leaders has also been seen in non-populist leaders in the Latin American context.

[31] The leaders looked into through this study are: Alberto Fujimori (Peru), Hugo Chavez from Latin America and Jean Marie Le Pen, Andreas Pappendrou (Greece) and Pim Fortuyn (Netherlands) from Europe

attempts consider the fact that it requires a certain amount of political 'entrepreneurship' to dislodge existing voting blocks from their traditional representatives, parties, loyalties and ideologies to create 'novel social cleavages'.. Populism, thus:

> 'obtains when a certain political entrepreneur is able to polarize politics by creating a cleavage based on the interaction between "the people" versus some establishment, thus forging a mass political movement' (Pappas, 2012)

The centrality of the role of a personalistic (inclusive of a charismatic persona) leader in definitions of populism grounded in political strategy, however, has been questioned. For instance, non-charismatic leaders such as Alberto Fujimori of Peru have also successfully managed to capture and exercise electoral power. Populism, in terms of political strategy, has therefore been redefined in terms of 'appeals, 'location and 'linkages'. The appeal includes rhetorical operations that create an 'us vs. them' dichotomy and offers citizens/voters the impetus to vote and support populist entities. Populist appeals often have an 'anti-establishment'[32] character highlighting the inequality between those who allegedly 'hold power and those who do not'. Location refers to the location of populist actors in the political party system of a polity; they can be 'insiders' or 'outsiders', mainstream or marginal, and come equipped with different sets of capabilities and potencies. However, here an intermediate category of the 'maverick' politician has been found more fruitful, someone who might belong to an established political party (and is thus not an 'outsider') but reshapes it radically and claim to be anti-establishmentarian (Barr, 2009). 'Linkage' refers to the 'means by which political actors and constituents exchange support and influence'[33]. Electoral linkages are usually activated during elections and are manifested in accountability. Accountability is used by supporters and the rank and file of parties to appraise the performance of leaders and how reflective such leadership is of their wishes and views. In populism, such views and desires are often shaped by the populist leader her/himself. 'Plebiscitarianism' is a form of electoral linkage where the leader substitutes the party as the vessel in which the wishes of 'the people' as vested. It can be considered a form of 'direct democracy' a la Rousseau that might easily devolve into majoritarianism (Mainwaring, 2006).

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[32] Anti-establishmentarian, and not just 'anti-politics' or 'anti-party'
[33] Four types of 'linkages' have been considered - Clientelisitc, directive, participatory and electoral. See Lawson, Kay (1980) 'Political Parties and Linkage', in Kay Lawson (ed.) *Political Parties and Linkage: A Comparative Perspective*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Given these arguments, Barr has reformulated populism as:

> 'populism as reflect[ing] the specific combination of appeals, location and linkages that suggests a correction based on enhanced accountability rather than increased participation. More specifically, it is a mass movement led by an outsider or maverick seeking to gain or maintain power by using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages' (Barr, 2009)

Some scholars have attempted to extend such definitions of populism to include social movement mobilisations[34]. However, too broad an extension of the boundaries of these definitions would result in a conceptual muddle (Moffitt, 2016). Another drawback of this approach is that an overwhelming focus on the personalistic leadership could lead to a negligence of organisational structures. There is no reason to believe that populism thrives only in instances of low institutionalism or organisation - the fortunes of Le Pen's *Front National* or Wilder's *Partij voor de Vrijheid* prove that populism can certainly thrive in an environment of tight party discipline and organisation. This is even the case in the Latin American context, where there are actually a number of different types of organisational linkages used by populists—Roberts identifies at least four subtypes of Latin American populism on this basis (organic, labor, partisan, and electoral) (Roberts, 2007).

2d Mediatization, social media and populism

In contemporary times when various socio-political institutions and interactions among them are increasingly 'mediatized' (Hjarvard, 2008), populism has also inevitably been mediatized[35]. Populist leaders are stereotypically seen to have a media-genic and charismatic personality. Social media, especially, allows populist leaders to evade the possible 'gate-keeping' mechanisms and disapproval of mainstream media (Schroeder, 2018).

Populist leaders can gainfully exploit the 'logic of connective action', which allows people to be a part of political movements through 'personal action frames'. Unlike the earlier logics of collective action, connective action takes place through self-motivated actions of molecularised individuals utilising internet platforms to appropriate in a personalized manner online content relating to matters of public importance and the common good (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Digital content bearing

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[34] Jansen, Robert S. (2011). 'Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism'. *Sociological Theory*, *29*(2), pp. 75–96

[35] See Mazzoleni, G., 2014. Mediatization and political populism. In *Mediatization of politics* (pp. 42-56). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

populist messages can be very easily appropriated by individuals online to suit their own personal needs (Engesser *et al.*, 2017).

From the above section, we see the construction and performance of the 'leader' and the 'people' emerging as the twin lynchpins of most manifestations of populism, and in present times these are entangled to mediatization and now all-pervasive social media platforms. In the next chapter we shall elaborate on these, how they operate in India and how certain approaches to studying populism help us with this research.

3 Significance of research:

This research seeks to bring into prominence the increasing role of multi-modal artifacts such as memes in everyday political articulations online in India. In addition to the appropriated and transformed images of popular political leaders generated online by multiple users, I also seek to study official images, including selfies, of the politicians disseminated on social media and elsewhere (which sometimes serve as constituent materials for memes). This brings into the discussion the impact of 'personalization' on politics and the affective impact of the countenance of these politicians.

This discussion is embedded in larger questions of populism in India, as the hegemonic political project in India and its opposition engage in politics that is increasingly mediatized. This research shall help in illuminate the extent to which these political mobilisations are populist in nature. The specific thread of interrogation this research has tremendous explanatory potential *vis-à-vis* the proliferation of these 'personalized' political images and the prevalence of a unique 'digital' populism on social media platforms. This promises to advance the knowledge cache of political science not just in South Asia but in the Global South as a whole with its unique digital practices. This research is qualitative in nature, and addresses lacunae that quantitative approaches may leave behind. Such surveys also fail to capture the modalities of how the figure of the leader, here seen in the form of images, can influence voters as they 'become' a people. There are quantitative surveys that miss out on the 'signaling' capabilities of these political leaders on social media, and the rationale of political communication through content such as the images which we are going to study in this thesis.

The populist leaders under research here maintain a seemingly unmediated content with their followers and ordinary users online. Textual and visual responses usually accompany both official images and memes.. Thus, in addition to the partisan claims made through these memes, the publics and counter-publics formed around the official images and the memes could also be studied as a case of political contestation online. This research will provide an opportunity to study online visual cultures and their political implications in the South Asian context, especially in a populist polity.

4 Literature Review:

4a Memetic media and value of the 'countenance'

There is a growing body of scholarship on online visual artefacts such as memes. They are multi-modal techno-cultural artefacts created by everyday users, designed to be humorous and widely transmitted and manipulated online by other users[36]. Limor Shifman has defined memes as having structural similarities in their content, form or 'stance' as they are often created 'with awareness of each other'. As 'produsage' they are 'circulated, imitated' and most importantly transformed by many users online (Shifman, 2014, pp. 7–8). Memes seem to serve as one of the many 'vernaculars' that one comes across online, a shared mode of everyday, 'commonplace' articulation that results from playful, creative collaboration[37].

The visual practices of memes and trolling share common roots in North American imageboard-based cyber-cultural sites. As such, a 'dissociated', 'unsympathetic' laughter is often seen in memes, and even humorous content that is ironic and playful (as many memes are) can lead to the creation of an 'us' that is laughing and a 'them' that does not (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013) (Phillips, 2015) (Milner, 2016). Different regions of the world have now developed cyber-cultures wherein there are heated political debates involving the deployment of 'emic' slangs in textual or

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[36] See Davison, P. (2012) 'The Language of Internet Memes', in Mandiberg, M. (ed.) *The Social Media Reader*, NYU Press

[37] For Burgess, 'vernacular creativity' is 'not elite or institutionalised; nor is it extraordinary or spectacular, but rather is identified on the basis of its *commonness*'. 'Vernacular' has a 'a poetics of everyday talk and performance that cuts across both 'high' and 'low' culture' and has a 'ordinary *everydayness*'. See Burgess, J. (2007) *Vernacular creativity and new media (Doctoral dissertation, Queensland University of Technology)*

visual form, leading to online media ecologies of vernacular inclusivity that also reproduce older hierarchies and exclusions along community identities and gender (Udupa, 2018).

Digital visual artefacts such as memes that are usually used to comment upon everyday, banal issues by drawing upon popular culture can be easily repurposed for socio-political commentary through the affordances of contemporary photo-editing facilities. This is in keeping with Ethan Zuckerman's 'cute cats theory of digital activism', wherein he posits that practices such as making funny memes can be channelled towards political ends using the same skills usually employed towards achieving banal ends[38].

Not just memes, but the images officially disseminated of popular political leaders are artifacts constantly reproduced and transformed and are always in circulation. This is hardly surprising in an age which has a legacy of a few decades wherein 'style, appearance and personality' of politicians have challenged the primacy of ideology, political programme or policy decisions and emerged victorious in front of the 'apparatus' (Corner and Pels, 2003, p. 2); the ascension to prominence of the bodily presence of the politician in terms of gestures, posture, facial expressions, dress, hairstyle and other ambiguous performances such as finger-wagging, clenched jaws and so on[39]. In such a scenario, 'style' assumes great importance in the era of personality politics[40]. As we shall extensively discuss in the second chapter, populism as 'style' is the is the theoretical framework we adopt in this research. In subsequent sections of this chapter it shall become more apparent why this approach promises to yield rich dividends vis-à-vis the questions we raise.

The impact of the online facial and bodily representations of these leaders has drawn scholarly interest in recent times. For instance, from the inception of his social media presence in 2011,

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[38] See Zuckerman, E. (2015) 'Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression', in Danielle, A. and Light, J.S. (ed.) *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age*, University of Chicago Press

[39] See Fairclough, N. (2000) *New Labour, new language?*, Psychology Press

[40] According to Dick Pels, style is: 'heterogeneous ensemble of ways of speaking, acting, looking, displaying, and handling things, which merge into a symbolic whole that immediately fuses matter and manner, message and package, argument and ritual. It offers political rhetoric, posturing and instinct, the expression of sentiments (such as political fear, envy or loathing) and presentational techniques (such as face-work, gesticulation or dress codes) an equally legitimate place as political rationality, thus knitting together 'higher' and 'baser' style elements in a loosely coherent but powerful pattern of political persuasion'. See Pels, D. (2003) 'Aesthetic Representation and Political Style: Re-balancing I dentity and Difference in Media Democracy', in Corner, J. and Pels, D. (ed.) *Media and the restyling of politics: Consumerism, celebrity and cynicism*, Sage

Prime Minister Modi's social media accounts have disseminated images of himself that have portrayed him as an accessible and tech-savvy leader interacting directly to ordinary citizens.[41]. The countenance of leaders such as the PM, Kejriwal, Rahul Gandhi etc. provide easy recognition value in online images and thus enable a wide range of individuals to develop 'parasocial' relations or identification (Pels, 2003) with these memes, just as celebrities from other fields such as sports, cinema and music do. The drive to manipulate digital images of these leaders is a result of the fact that the representations of these political leaders serve as meaningful texts that can be laden with affective investment[42]. In the South Asian context, portraits of nationalist leaders had been used to galvanise anti-colonial sentiments. Scholars have posited that such images could often arouse affective intensities through a certain 'figural' aspect of the portraiture that went beyond discursive elements in the image (Pinney, 2004). Through this research, we will triangulate on both these sets of images, the official images and the memes. This will help us make valuable additions to the scholarship on political communication regarding what official images and selfies of leaders on social media achieve, how they might be used for mobilisation, what roles memes play and how do publics form around both these sets of images.

4b Selfies

Selfies have become a mainstay of modern popular visual culture. It serves not only as a photograph but as a distinct mode of self-documentation and self-presentation, made possible through the front-facing cameras of smartphones. There has been a lot of scholarly discussion regarding the gendered allegations of narcissism aimed at selfies. In this thesis we have focused more on how political leaders have used selfies as a form of political communication. We dwell upon the inherent drive built into selfies of 'sharing' – sharing one's perspectives, sharing intimacy, etc. Selfies change the spatio-temporal dynamics of the conventional photographic image, and have their own gestural politics, which provides us with insights that help us answer the questions raised in this thesis.

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[41] See Pal, J. (2015) 'Banalities Turned Viral: Narendra Modi and the Political Tweet', *Television & New Media*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 1-10

[42] See Street, J. (2003) 'The Celebrity Politician - Politica l Style and Popular Culture', in Corner, J. and Pels, D. (ed.) *Media and the Restyling of Politics - Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*, Sage Publications

4c Politics as popular culture, popular culture as politics

Multi-modality[43] is a distinguishing feature of many contemporary digital visual cultures, such as the culture of meme-making multi-modal nature (Kress, 2011). This has become possible through the proliferation of software and mobile applications that has made the editing of visual images (and audio-visual content as well). The discursive sources from which these components can be from across the cultural spectrum - 'high', 'low', classical, folk, popular etc. Thus, this multi-modal quality makes it possible for widespread participation, accessibility and the expression and transmission of different opinions and viewpoints. This is predicated upon the ability of the 'prosumers' (producers+consumers) to weave together content with varying degrees of complexity involving text, image and other expressive forms to suit their hermeneutic requirements. The ability to produce and/or 'read' such content is contingent upon being able to draw on the 'capacities of the constituent semiotic resource systems' (Lemke, 2002). Such a culture of 'mash-ups' (in the case of this research, visual ones) and 'remixes' used for political commentary is driven by 'hybridization, recycling, and irony—the holy trinity of pop culture today' (Serazio, 2008).

Memes are prime exemplars of this weaving together of complex semiotic and semantic webs drawing from resource pools that can sometimes seem utterly This 'playing with genres' has always been a hallmark of memetic content since its inception (Kuipers, 2002). This juxtaposition of constituent elements that are quite incongruous with each other is, in fact, a characteristic of much of modern humour (Raskin, 1984). Popular culture remains a veritable fountain for memetic content due to its accessibility to a wide swathe of the population. This allows for higher participation in the consumption and production of memetic products. It also allows for antagonistic political factions to draw from a common pool of resources while positing contending political discourses. This lends accessibility to the memetic culture (Milner, 2013).

The visuals of the political leader remain a mainstay in this pool of common resources as a large number of users in a national context recognise them. Their visage is a constant in the visual backdrop of everyday life in a country like India, with posters, cut-outs, television news screens

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[43] Most digital content nowadays has more than one mode of expression. They are no longer limited to only text and speech. It considers the other resources available for users for meaning-making and broadcasting themselves – gestural moves, vocal inflections, facial expressions etc.

etc. featuring them regularly. The potential for re-working a political leader's promotional material was evident in the case of Barack Obama. His 'Hope' posters for the 2008 elections reached iconic status. However, the same image was later subverted by the Occupy movement in the US. His figure was a frequently used template for memetic content, sometimes in support, but very often as a critique against him (Milner, 2012). Donald Trump's supporters on online forums gained notoriety because of the racist, misogynist memes they made (such as their appropriation of the figure of 'Pepe the frog') [44]. Supporters made edited images in support of the then South Korean President Noh Moo-hyun during the politically tumultuous period of an impeachment motion against him in 2004 (Lee, 2009, pp. 166–167). Morphed images bearing the muffler-donning figure of Aam Aadmi Party's Arvind Kejriwal were also widely shared online during the AAP's foray into electoral politics in 2014, with some idolising him while others lampooned him[45] [46].

Henry Jenkins argues that such cultures of visuality where users produce, transmit and consume images of politicians for political commentary and opinion is a form of 'Photoshop for Democracy', 'bringing the realm of political discourse closer to the everyday life experiences of citizens' (Jenkins, 2004). These 'everyday life experiences' and practices of citizen-users are constituted by 'practices that one acquires as part of living the everyday life rather than through specialized and learned practices' and are connected to the political culture of a region. These practices may seem rather banal and bereft of political consequence at first glance. Some of these images featuring political leaders may not even have anything to do with political commentary. However, they create the infrastructural resource pool that makes political commentary online possible. In addition, the distinctions between the 'political, playful and social' are often fluid when it comes to memes; sometimes all three are at operation in the same meme (Milner, 2016, pp. 70–73).

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[44] See Douglas, H. (2016) *Meme warfare: how the power of mass replication has poisoned the US election*, 4 November, [Online], Available: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/04/political-memes-2016-election-hillary-clinton-donald-trump [15 November 2016]

[45] See Pandey, V. (2014) *'MufflerMan' Kejriwal creates Twitter buzz*, 27 November, [Online], Available: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30205289 [17 Novermber 2016]

[46] See Staff, F. (2014) *#MufflerMan: AAP turns Twitter bashing on its head, makes Kejriwal a superhero*, 28 November, [Online], Available: http://www.firstpost.com/living/mufflerman-aap-turns-twitter-bashing-on-its-head-makes-kejriwal-a-superhero-1824847.html [28 November 2016]

Quotidian discourses of politics rarely occur along the lines of the rational, intersubjective mode Habermas suggested. This holds true, especially for the internet (Udupa, 2017). Instead, one finds conversations that seem to 'encompasses irony, personal narratives, aesthetic interventions, theatricality and visibility'. Thus, studying online rhetoric and commentary needs 'an attunement to the vicissitudes and rhythms of daily life', which 'involves continual communication with, and responsibility to, real situations and concrete others'[47]. The existing scholarship on political communications online has also found that the political nature of these networked platforms lies in 'liminality, in pre-emergence and emergence, or at the point at which new formations of the political are in the process of being imagined but not yet articulated' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 71). This is a research that adds to the scholarship that brings together all these aspects together, the 'highs' and 'lows' of popular culture and the 'highs' 'lows' of populist 'style', but in the visual content of the official handles of the political leaders mentioned here, and in the memes that feature the figure of these leaders.

4d Online 'publics'

Dana Boyd has argued that publics are 'imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (Boyd, 2011). Scholars have also focused on the publics that come into being through the production, circulation and consumption of visual artifacts online. There is a possibility of heterogeneous publics emerging when shared visual practices are performed on a common online platform that gives rise to a collective aesthetic (Lindtner *et al.*, 2011). Collectives formed around memes on social media in India can often have a very pronounced middle-class orientation (Doron, 2016). This calls for a renewed inquiry into the hegemonic role of this middle-class in online spaces (as well as in India's aspirational populism). Populist, non-liberal, embodied publics may form through the circulation of mass-mediated texts (Cody, 2015). Greater scholarly engagement with such online publics in the Indian context is required.

Online publics and counter-publics have been studied thus far, emphasising issues of social justice and subordinated, non-dominant groups. They have also contended with dichotomies such as

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[47] See Gardiner, M.E. (2004) 'Wild publics and grotesque symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on dialogue, everyday life and the public sphere', in Crossley, N. and Roberts, J.M. (ed.) *After Habermas: New perspectives on the public sphere*, Sociological review monograph.

'public-private' and 'publics-audiences'; audiences are not merely passive consumers but can be a collective with political potency[48]. The manifestations of such publics and counter-publics may often have varying degrees of political engagement, and some of the scholarship on online publics has looked into this. Such scholarship is often seen to take a cue from Nancy Fraser's distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' publics with regard to their opinion formation and decision-making capabilities, as well as David Dayan's distinction between mundane-publics, issue-publics and counter-publics based on their supposed political efficacy. Thus, this thesis promises to make valuable additions to the issue of online political publics in Indian social media spaces, especially publics that coalesce around political visuals.

5 Research Questions:

The discussion in the literature review section focused on two critical aspects. First, the social discourses and processes that inform and influence the genre of official visuals, including selfies, and memes under discussion here – the entanglements between popular culture and politics and online publics. Secondly, the formal components of one set of these images - memes, their multi-modality, their remixed, photo-shopped nature, their humour. We have already fleshed out the conceptual history of populism, and seen how the construction, mobilisation and performance by various means of the 'leader' and 'people' are important to such a mode of politics.

The discussion on mediated populism, populist leadership and the culture of imagistic portrayal of political leaders in India as a form of political communication leads to the following research questions:

1) **How do such images of political leaders translate into partisan political articulations and mobilisations? How do they invite commentary and criticism, support or opposition?**

2) **What do we learn about the nature of populist politics and mobilisations from these images and articulations? How does that change or add to our general understanding of populism in India?**

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[48] See Baym, N.K. and Boyd, D. (2012) 'Socially mediated publicness: An introduction', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 320-329.

3) **What is distinctive about the political articulations and the semiotic organisation or composition of memes of Indian politicians that makes them different from similar images in other contexts?**

As has been discussed above, collectives or online 'networked publics' may be formed online, as well as publics around shared cultural practices online such as the production and circulation of memes, which may bear political significance. Thus,

4) **What is the nature of the online collectives or 'publics' formed around the official images and memes of political leaders?**

6 Methodology:

6a Rationale behind sample of politicians

The rationale behind choosing the three leaders (Narendra Modi, Arvind Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi) in this proposal is not based on the number of their online followers alone, although they each have chalked up an enviable number of followers on their official social media handles and pages. The Prime Minister is ranked third amongst Twitter handles of politicians in terms of numbers, with over 44 million followers. His Facebook page, too, has close to 44 million followers. Arvind Kejriwal has over 14 million followers on his official Twitter handle and around 7.1 million followers on his official Facebook page. Rahul Gandhi has over 2.1 million followers on his official Facebook page, and close to 8 million followers on his official Twitter handle (although an independent audit has claimed that 61% of Modi's, 68% of Rahul Gandhi's and 51% of Twitter followers are 'fake', Twitter has officially disagreed with this assessment and has claimed that the methodology used to arrive at this conclusion is inadequate)[49]. Although Twitter keeps going on purges of fake followers of prominent celebrities and politicians the number of followers lost through this elimination figures in the range of 5-30 thousand for each of the politicians under discussion here[50].

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[49] See IANS (2018) *Reports Claiming Top Indian Leaders Have Fake Followers Deeply Flawed: Twitter*, 19 March, [Online], Available: https://www.news18.com/news/tech/reports-claiming-top-indian-leaders-have-fake-followers-deeply-flawed-twitter-1694197.html [11 October 2018]

[50] See Mathur, Y. (2018) *Politicians, Bollywood stars lose followers as Twitter goes on a clean-up drive*, 13 July, [Online], Available: https://theprint.in/governance/politicians-bollywood-stars-lose-followers-as-twitter-goes-on-a-clean-up-drive/82847/ [7 October 2018]

The choice of the three politicians mentioned is, however, also based on their stature and popularity as prominent politicians on the national stage. While Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister, Rahul Gandhi is the leader of the principal opposition party in the legislature. Arvind Kejriwal came to power as the Chief Minister of India's capital region on the back of a widely-known anti-corruption movement. But perhaps most importantly, these are the politicians that have become integral part of the vernacular of Indian online political conversations, and have been the most recurring subjects of memes. The sobriquet given to Modi and Rahul Gandhi, namely 'Pappu' and 'Feku', have become an integral part of the online parlance to the extent that Google searches of these names lead directly to Modi and Rahul Gandhi[51]. The prevalence of these politicians in online banter is an observation that I have also recorded during my previous research work.

In addition, both Narendra Modi and Arvind Kejriwal have had online campaigns that have played a significant role in their political careers. What sets these campaigns apart from others is their distinct visual dimension. The visual aspects of Narendra Modi's Twitter presence and its implications have been discussed elsewhere in this proposal. During the Delhi elections of 2014, #mufflerman was trending on Twitter and was re-tweeted over 250,000 times[52]. In response to those opposed to Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party using the hashtag in derisive terms, AAP supporters created images based on movie posters of popular superhero movies such as Spiderman. This visual element of their online presence makes these politicians well-suited for this research. Another reason behind choosing these politicians is the prevalence of what Ralph Schroeder has called 'digital populism'; in an overall Indian political milieu characterised by 'competitive populism', these political leaders are seemingly engaged in direct, unhindered communication through social media with their supporters (Schroeder, 2018).

6b Data collection

We began with a broad, exploratory orientation for this research, familiarising ourselves with the milieu. We were, to quote Mitsuki Ito, 'messing around', scrolling through meme pages and

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[51] See See IANS (2018) *Now Google search for 'Feku' leads to Modi, 'Pappu' to Rahul Gandhi*, 17 May, [Online], Available: https://brandequity.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/digital/now-google-search-for-feku-leads-to-modi-pappu-to-rahul-gandhi/64207414 [12 October 2018]

[52] Pandey, V. (2014) *'MufflerMan' Kejriwal creates Twitter buzz*, 27 November, [Online], Available: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30205289 [17 Novermber 2016]

accounts, and the official handles of the politicians under study, watching images, .gifs, videos and reading comments and posts as a form of everyday immersion in this digital, visual milieu (Itō, 2010). This is an 'interest-driven' 'genre of participation', as compared to 'hanging out', which for Ito involves interacting with one's kith and kin, friends and acquaintances (ibid., p.16). It is interesting to note that in the course of this thesis, we will repeatedly see that the boundaries between these 'genres of participation' collapse frequently in political communication, as an intimate relationship between leaders and followers is often the goal. There are also modes of 'geeking out', which involves a more intense interest-driven 'genre of participation'. The administrators and founders of the meme pages, who collated and uploaded the memes, could perhaps be associated with this mode, as well as some of the content creators.

The data collection was significantly informed by online ethnographic methods (Hine, 2001), with significant amounts of time devoted to 'lurking' as we triangulated on the sites best suited for data collection. We were first alerted to 'lurking' during my field-work for my M. Phil. thesis, where we attempted to locate politics in everyday interactions with and on the internet. We use the phrase 'ethnographically-informed' and the term 'lurking' here for strategic reasons, as this research was not envisaged as a full-fledged ethnography; ethnographic methodology's concepts partly describe how the data collection was carried out[53]. The sites of data collection had a certain archival nature, and we gathered the data *post-facto*, after it had been 'uttered' or 'created'. However, keeping an eye on what users are up to online has always been an integral part of 'digital' or 'online ethnography', where one is in mediated contact with the subjects of one's study (Pink *et al.*, 2016).

A considerable body of scholarship has developed over the past two decades on conducting ethnographies online[54], and some of its methodological insights have helped this study. The 'mediated' nature of the contact with one's respondents is foregrounded here, and there is no ambiguity regarding the 'mediation'. These are methods of 'data-gathering…based on computer-

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[53] Ethnography's focus on reflexivity has no bearing here, as the analytical framework involves visual, discursive and iconographic methods. This is elaborated in the next sub-section, and will recur again and again in the thesis. The objectives and questions of this research instead focus on the manner of the abstract 'we'/reader/user and how they are positioned vis-à-vis these images, as leaders seek to transmit ideas and ideologies through them.

[54] These ethnographies have been given different nomenclature, depending upon the scholar – 'digital ethnography', 'ethnography on the internet', 'online ethnography', 'ethnography of virtual spaces', etc.

mediated communication' (Murthy, 2008). One can observe the goings-on on these digital sites. This is a crucial area of distinction of 'online' ethnography from 'offline' ethnography, given the well-known 'writing culture' crisis ushered in by the problematisations of Marcus and others in ethnographic writing (Hine, 2001). 'Digital ethnography' scholars have taken these lessons to heart, considering the mediated nature of any ethnographic research. This is an aporetic point that also speaks to certain concerns in this thesis, the question of the 'seemingly unmediated'..

The scholars have also grappled with the question of authenticity, an issue that may only sometimes plague offline ethnographies. It is sometimes insisted that the identity performed online by a user be founded upon the same identity offline; otherwise, the data collected online is considered dubious. At the very least, 'authenticity' remains highly desired in this age of fake accounts, bots etc. (Postill and Pink, 2012). Such an approach, however, might overlook the negotiation and engagement that is required in different social, offline fields to establish identity. It also reduces the weightage of the online field with characteristics and affordances of its own, and treats the offline as a repository of the 'real' (Hine, 2001). As we discuss in the subsequent sections, the 'ecological' approach also tackles the question of 'authenticity' from a different perspective.

One of the earliest insights of internet ethnography has been that there are two aspects to social scientific, qualitative approaches to studying the internet – the discursive performance of users using text and symbols, and the text itself as data (Hine, 2001; Postill and Pink, 2012). In contemporary times this can be extended to multimedia content, including images. This content, textual or otherwise, need not always be captured in real time; it can be collected later due to the persistence of content on the internet or social media platforms. This data is also 'searchable', through the affordances of search engines, search bars etc.[55] Thus, the spatial and temporal configurations of fieldwork done online also have their own specificities. It re-configures the private-public boundary as well as the online-offline divide, making them far more fluid, (Pink *et al.*, 2016). As internet access deepens through smartphones and the internet penetrate ever more the personal, cultural, economic, financial and political fields, the online also gains significant

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[55] See dana boyd (2014). *It's complicated. The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press

influence over offline events. In the next chapter, we will discuss in some detail how media technologies have imposed their logics on social and political processes (mediatization).

Lurking

'Lurking' is a particular mode of online presence that we found was practiced by my respondents in previous research. (It is, in fact, a mode almost all users practice on social media). The practice involves not registering one's presence in online forums while following the content and the debates therein with some diligence. Such a mode of interaction, which my previous research and the extant scholarship says is quite widespread, requires us to rethink our instinctive understanding of engagement and participation, especially regarding the internet. 'Lurking' has, has often had to bear the burden of negative connotations and associations, including accusations of being passive consumers of digital content, in almost parasitic mode[56]. However, newer thinking about the practice attempts to reframe this practice as a form of 'listening' or 'listening in'[57].

So, our prolonged presence or 'lurking' on the sites chosen for data collection was a form of comprehending how meaning-making[58] and place-making were happening on these sites. We have carefully blurred the comments left by users on all the images we showcase throughout the thesis, so that only the image remains visible. In the fifth chapter, when we cite a few comments below a couple of the memes, where we have carefully blocked out the names of the commenters. The data we use in this thesis is public. One-half of it is the official images of the political leaders, meant for public consumption. The other half are from meme pages whose administrators are already well-known in the media, and bear the responsibility of the authorship of the memes posted in their pages. In this way we have attempted to address any ethical concerns regarding privacy and anonymity. We have had no contact with the page administrators or commenters. We may, therefore, confine the data collection method to the more generic, umbrella term 'fieldwork'.

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[56] See Katz, J. (1998) *Luring the Lurkers*, [Online], Available: http://slashdot.org/features/98/12/28/1745252.shtml ; Nonnecke, B. and Preece, J. (2001) 'Why Lurkers Lurk', AMCIS 2001 Proceedings Paper 294 and Morris, M. and Ogan, C. (1996) 'The Internet as mass medium', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 1, no. 4

[57] See Crawford, K. (2009) 'Following you: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media', *Continuum*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 525-535

[58] This thesis will draw from theories of performativity, where meaning-making always draws from a background cache of cultural meaning

Such an approach also helped us acquaint ourselves with the online visual and semantic 'folksonomic vernacular'[59] particular to India, especially in Hindi and English. This is another helpful component that has gone into our data collection drawing from insights into digital ethnography - localisation and contextualisation. For example, one finds memetic texts and images online where Indian users ask political opponents to 'apply Burnol'. Burnol is a commonly available ointment used for treating minor burns. This is a biting barb one applies to one's political opponents after having 'roasted' them i.e. defeated them or incited them to anger and frustration through one's posts and comments[60].

Certain ready-to-hand tools are in-built to these platforms and allow a certain amount of targeted data sampling. For instance, on Facebook a certain search function on topical pages allows one to search for posts from a specific date. Twitter has the 'Twitter Advanced Search' option which allows for posts by a particular Twitter account from a certain period to be accessed.

Official images

The data collection process for this research will be conducted online on social networking platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as they serve as the prime platform for disseminating official photographs of the politicians planned to be studied. To study the 'networked publics' that form around the online efforts at self-styling by these politicians, the official Twitter handles (@narendramodi, @RahulGandhi and @ArvindKejriwal) and official Facebook and Instagram, pages of Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal will be the sites of collection of data in the form of official images and selfies with the facial and bodily representation of these leaders. Purposive sampling will be carried out to collect the images pertinent to this research. The official images sampled will also be correlated with meme images to be sampled in subsequent steps in order to delineate a sample of official images that have been

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[59] See Jones, R.H. and Hafner, C.A. (2012) *Understanding digital literacies: A practical introduction.*, Routledge and Burgess, J. (2007) *Vernacular creativity and new media (Doctoral dissertation, Queensland University of Technology*

[60] One finds a similar example in a handbook on digital ethnographic methods edited by Tom Boellstroff and others. They had run a series of online chats through quantitative analysis, only to find a result that perplexed them – repeated occurrence of the word 'bunnies'. There were no indicators in the dataset that could explain this interest in rabbits. It was only after a qualitative researcher who had some experience in the chat group intervened that the issue was clarified – the conversation was regarding 'bunny slippers', a form of footwear that enhances the height to which one could jump. See Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce & T. L. Nardi 2012. *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

appropriated as source material for memes This step will allow us to understand how the archive of images has been appropriated by users to create a text that counters the official image these politicians try to create online. The particular period from which to collect the data is important here; for instance, Rahul Gandhi only established his official Twitter presence in 2015, while Narendra Modi has been proactive since 2012 (although he had started his Twitter account in 2009) when he declared his intention to be Prime Minister. The visual data (and the responses connected to it) will be collected from a period stretching from 2009 (when Modi joined Twitter) to May, 2019 (when the last parliamentary elections of India were held). We selected roughly 20 such official images of each leader (including selfies), these 20 being the most liked images of them. In the two chapters dealing with the leaders' self-presentation these images have been discussed thematically. The most relevant images were obtained from periods when such accounts saw a flurry of activity, such as Narendra Modi's accounts before the 2014 elections.

User-generated images

The second step of this research began as an exploratory step, as those sites in popular social media platforms that host user-generated content, especially user-transformed images and memes of the leaders under discussion here were identified. Keeping in mind the objectives of this research, certain Facebook pages that could prove to be prospective sites of data collection were identified.

These sites usually enjoy a high volume of traffic in content such as memes, and have a huge number of 'Likes' and 'Followers', going into the hundreds of thousands. Another criterion for choosing them was also the avowedly political stance taken up by these sites on many issues. After this exploratory stage, the 'discursive strand' pertinent to this research was traced by locating the uploads that feature political leaders' memes. The question of the 'publics' and 'counter-publics' are also linked to these memes. The pages have been selected after careful observation over the past few years. We selected 4 Facebook pages and a Twitter page. They are:

- The Frustrated Indian[61]: The page 'The Frustrated Indian' has over 1 million followers, and usually takes a stance that is avowedly nationalist and in favour of the Modi government. Its content is often critical of what it considers to be hypocritical behaviours of 'liberals', 'seculars'

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[61] https://www.facebook.com/TheFrustratedIndian/

and 'leftists' in India. The owner of the page also runs rightlog.in, self-described as 'India's Leading Right Wing Opinion Blog'.

- Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy[62]: The anonymous founder of Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy has stated on many occasions that the political satire in his page was developed, among many other reasons, by the loud presence of Hindu nationalists and fans of the Narendra Modi government online. 'Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy' had started out parodying the noted public ideologue of the Hindu Right Subramanian Swamy. It was involved in some amount of controversy as well in 2014; a series of memes that were posted in the page ridiculed Swamy's then ongoing narratives of misappropriation of Hindu figures from ancient India by the West.

Both this parody page and the official Facebook page of Subramaniam Swamy were under the same name (the official page was run by a right-wing website named 'Shaankhnaad'). When Swamy came to know of the unofficial page, he lodged an official complaint to Facebook in order to have the parody page taken down. In a rather comic turn of events, Facebook took down the official page of Subramaniam Swamy, while the parody page with the memes ridiculing him remained intact[63].

The founder of Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy remained anonymous at first due to concerns about cyber-bullying and safety. 'Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy' that had started out parodying the noted public ideologue of the Hindu Right Subramanian Swamy. Later, Mohammed Zubair, who is also a co-founder of one of India's leading fact-checking website AltNews, finally revealed that he was the person behind Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy. The page had over 700,000 followers at the time of this investigation.

- Beef Janata Party[64]: It makes its sympathies clear with its slogan 'Beefunists Unite'. It regularly features memes aimed at the Hindu Right and the current government. It has over 393,000 followers.

- History of India (@realhistorypic)[65]: This Twitter page has over 260k followers on Twitter. The handle has its signature series of memes. The format follows an overall stylistic motif that has

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[62] https://www.facebook.com/SusuSwamy/
[63] Firstpost Staff (2014) *Oops! Facebook accidentally deletes Subramanian Swamy's real account, parody page lives on*, 19 December, [Online], Available: http://www.firstpost.com/living/oops-facebook-accidentally-deletes-subramanian-swamys-real-account-parody-page-lives-on-1857147.html [19 August 2017]
[64] https://www.facebook.com/beefjanataparty
[65] https://twitter.com/RealHistoryPic?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

been archived as 'fake history'[66], which is used to comment on current socio-political events. Its motif is described as 'an image macro series featuring photographs and screenshots of various people and fictional characters accompanied by false historical captions'.

- 'Social Tamasha'[67]: The memes in this page are in Hindi. This gives us an opportunity to explore memes in a language that serves as a vernacular in a huge swathe of India's Northern part. The page claims to aim for humour through politics, and asks the viewer to not take the content seriously i.e. not take offence. However, the memes generally seem unsympathetic to Opposition parties, and favours the ruling regime.

In addition, I also chose a Facebook page that features political memes circulating on WhatsApp.

These pages are often repositories that host the lion's share of contemporary memes, even though the page administrators themselves might not have created the memes. In addition, given the popularity of memes as a communicative practice online, online news websites often host articles that attempt to capture the zeitgeist by detailing a particular genre of memes or an issue that generates a lot of memes[68]. Such articles will serve as another source of data, since a few of them are devoted to the specific memes created of the politicians under discussion here. The sample of memes and other user-generated image related to each politician under discussion here – Narendra Modi, Arvind Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi - is to be ten in number. The memes would be thematically divided during analysis.

6c Data analysis

We used the critical visual discourse analytic method for analysing the data. In particular, we used the visual discourse analytic method that Gunther Kress had devised as we found it best suited for this research[69]. This method has the advantage of bringing his previous semiotic approach developed with Theo van Leeuwen to bear upon modern mediated multi-modal artefacts such as

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[66] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/fake-history
[67] https://www.facebook.com/SocialTamasha
[68] See, for instance, Scroll Staff (2015) *Government apologises for altered picture of Modi in Chennai but Twitter can't stop laughing*, 04 December, [Online], Available: https://scroll.in/article/773697/government-apologises-for-altered-picture-of-modi-in-chennai-but-twitter-cant-stop-laughing [29 November 2016].
[69] See Kress, G. (2009) *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*, Routledge

memes[70]. As discussed before, memes have a multi-modal nature, and thus the multi-modal discourse analytic method that Gunther Kress devised promises to be useful for this research. This is necessitated by the fact that these images are digital-cultural artifacts that have compositional elements that, individually or in conjunction with others deliver specific expressions, expressions that are deployed by everyday users due to the affordances of digital media. Such 'modes' of expressions would not be possible with words and speech alone, and images, .gif files, audio-video files and others become essential components of meaning-making of those who create and those who 'read' a meme.

The approach accommodates questions regarding the interactional processes between the producer, an image and the viewer based on communitarian and socio-economic considerations. A very important consideration here is the resources available to a concrete viewer of a particular social location to create meaning/infer meaning/share meaning from an image in its totality. Thus, this methodology enables us to locate the working of power, discourse and history in an image's compositional, representational and interactional elements.. Examination of representational meaning allows us to focus on visual syntactic patterns that are created through various elements within the picture. In contrast, examination of interactional elements provides us with an understanding of the relationship that the producer of the image is trying to establish with the viewer. For instance, Kress and van Leeuwen conceptualised the 'contact' interaction between an image and a viewer in terms of 'vectors'. The gaze of a politician's image 'demands' something of viewer when it is a frontal gaze (attention, loyalty, awe etc.). When it is a side-profile, it 'offers' something to the viewer (a vision, a programme, shared imagination etc.). Compositional meaning refers to the way in which interactive and representational elements relate to each other to create a "meaningful whole" (ibid., p. 174). Again, the communicative function of the positioning of the various elements, which subjects or objects are foregrounded or pushed to the background, hand gestures, the colour of the politician's clothing, the relative importance ('salience') of one element over another etc. can also be analysed and their ideological implications unwrapped.

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[70] See Kress, G.R. and Van Leeuwen, T. (1996) *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*, Psychology Press

Thus, Kress and Van Leeuwen's approach helps us bear in mind the symbolic-hermenutic resources available to viewers/users/consumers of the images, and therefore, the positionality and possible interpretations of both the producers and receivers of the image. Such resources can have highly inter-textual and inter-visual qualities, drawing from folk, popular and 'high' culture.

Further, our research data will be analysed within the twin frameworks of political performativity and political 'style'. Thomas Blom-Hansen stresses upon the importance of visual spectacle in public appearances for contemporary politics, which is crucial for garnering political legitimacy and authority. Much of this depends upon the political performativity of leaders, which comprises 'the construction of images and spectacles…. that promotes the identity of a movement or party, defines its members, and promotes its cause or worldview'[71]. We will discuss in detail both concepts in the next chapter, Chapter I.

The social sciences have undergone a 'performative turn' in the past few decades, which looks for methodologies of study beyond the semiotic and the textual. This has been instrumental for an enhanced understanding of how social phenomena (identity, culture etc.) disseminate flow and/or acquire tangibility[72]. From a more cultural sociological perspective, Jeffrey Alexander understands politicians' public persona as a performance drawing from a script that is made from the signs and symbols of the collective cultural cache. A successful performance is one where the electorate believes the performance to be authentic. Our research would illuminate the 'stylistic' tactics employed by the politicians we study for their self-presentation to be counted as a 'successful' performance online, gaining them popularity and following[73].

As memes are artefacts engendering widespread participation, multiple iterations of a meme (that often bear different and divergent messages) might constitute a 'genre', and this will draw special

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[71] See Blom-Hansen T (2004) Politics as permanent performance: the production of political authority in the locality. In: Zavos J, Wyatt A, and Hewitt VM (eds) *The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India*. New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press

[72] See Lee, B., and E. LiPuma. 2002. "Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of ModernityLee, B., & LiPuma, E." *Public Culture* 14(1):191–213

[73] See Alexander, J. 2006. "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy" and Alexander, J., and J. L. Mast. 2006. "Introduction: Symbolic Action in Theory and Practice: The Cultural Pragmatics of Symbolic Action." in *Social performance: symbolic action, cultural pragmatics, and ritual, Cambridge cultural social studies*, edited by J. C. Alexander, B. Giesen, and Jason L. Mast. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press

attention in this research. Certain memes might also be Indian iterations of global meme genres which bear the photo-edited face or body of Indian politicians. It is also important to recognise that the number of 'Likes', 'Shares' and comments a meme post receives can very often be markers of the impact that meme has. The practices around online artefacts such as memes can constitute a 'field of production', as Pierre Bourdieu had put it, with their own internal rules and behavioural codes, and the 'Likes', 'Shares' and 'comments' may serve as means of 'symbolic recognition' in these online sites[74].

The ideological slant incorporated into memes at the production locus and its ramifications in circulation and reception (Milner, 2012) lend themselves to analysis through the multi-modal nature of memes. As such, the methodology propounded by Limor Shifman also comes in handy in the analysis of memes, as it helps us understand the participatory structure of memes (Shifman, 2014). We have analysed who's being included and excluded through the meme's humour and 'participation structure', and the orientation of the producers towards the readers/audience and their worldview.

For Shifman, a meme's 'stance' is politically relevant. It tells us about the implicit ideological positions of a meme. Stance reflects the positionality of the addressers i.e. the makers of the memes vis-à-vis the text, the sub-cultural codes and most importantly, to those being addressed through the meme. The stance of a meme is often determinant of the participatory boundaries in a meme – who can participate in the humour and who cannot. A' social negotiation' occurs whenever a viewer comes across a meme. The 'stance' determines whether the viewer is invited by the addressers/makers as one of them to participate in the meme, or is barred from participating. The tone or 'keying' of a meme is also important. It determines whether the meme is parodic in nature, or is a parodic allusion, or has a referential, deictic function. Even if the image in a meme has a serious, sombre tone, the accompanying text can derail this tone and lead it elsewhere into comedic territory (Shifman, 2014, p. 40).

We have mapped the nature of the publics and counter-publics as they gain tangibility through the circulation and consumption of these images. The publics and counter-publics are also marked by their ocular, spectatorial interpellation, as an audience, as consumers, and also sometimes as

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[74] See Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature* Columbia University Press

producers of these images of the leader. Thus, part of our conceptualisation of publics also involves a theoretical scaffolding built through the works of M.S.S. Pandian[75], Madhava Prasad[76] and S. V. Srinivas[77], scholars who have worked towards understanding the specular sources of populist acclaim for political leaders' 'image', both on and off screens (of varied sorts) in India's polity. The spectatorial position of these images is also based on neo-liberal consumptive values with a pronounced middle-class tilt, and thus the works of Leela Fernandes[78] and Ravinder Kaur[79] are also critical to this theoretical scaffolding.

6d Media 'ecological' approach

Furthermore, we take an 'ecological' approach to this research, taking a leaf out of Meyrowitz's[80] oeuvre, who considered that the media is not just content or platforms that host them but constitute an entire environment/ecology. These have a role on shaping the worldviews of their readers/consumers, as ecology plays a role in social perception and action. It is not, however, a technologically deterministic concept, and it considers this shaping to be a part of a number of other determinants such as political economy.

Now, an issue of tremendous concern that has emerged in recent years with regard to activities on the internet in general and on social media platforms, in particular, has been the issue of inauthentic content and inauthentic 'accounts/profiles'. The platforms we have chosen for data collecting may have fake accounts commenting or clicking 'likes', as may the comments or tweets accompanying the official visuals and 'selfies' of politicians. The severity of the issue has drawn the attention of state actors, civil society as well as corporations such as Facebook, especially

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[75] See Pandian MSS (2015) *The Image Trap: M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics*. Los Angeles ; London: SAGE Publications
[76] See Prasad M (2009) Fan bhakti and subaltern sovereignty: Enthusiasm as a political factor. *Economic and Political Weekly*: 68–76
[77] Srinivas SV (2018) *Politics As Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema*. Permanent Black
[78] See Fernandes L (2010) Hegemony and Inequality: Theoretical Reflections on India's 'New' Middle Class.; also see Srivastava S (2010) Urban Spaces, Disney-divinity and the Moral Middle Classes in Delhi. In: Baviskar A and Raka R (eds) *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*. Taylor & Francis.
 In: Baviskar A and Raka R (eds) *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*. Taylor & Francis
[79] See Kaur R (2020) *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First Century India*. South Asia in motion. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press
[80] See Meyrowitz, J 1985, *No Sense of Place. The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford

after they had been the subject of several high-profile legal and legislative trials[81]. Facebook has come up with definitions pertaining to issues and processes such as false news or false content, false amplification, 'astroturfing' etc.[82] Manufactured and inflated enthusiasm is a phenomenon often seen in the Indian political cyber-space, whether it be through the IT cells of political parties (which sometimes run teams or 'armies' of 'trolls')[83] or through organisations that provide such services for a fee[84]. While some parties have recruited volunteers to push their agenda on social media platforms, some have both volunteers and paid employees. Some parties have also subcontracted the work of pushing their digital agenda to private entities. These efforts are made to ensure their agenda has the most visibility in social media platforms.

Leaving aside bots, even if an account is fake, the opinion expressed through such accounts (whether one is paid to do so or with some other motivation) is not entirely useless and could prove to be productive with regard to this research. The comments and posts left by these accounts are also part of the overall ecology of the online Indian political sphere. In any case, the authentic accounts, too, are operating in the same ecology and have to contend with such manufactured content. This 'ecological' approach to political communication allows us to study the formation of critical masses on social media platforms that are part of the larger social imagination. Further, this approach lends itself to the study of circulation and performativity of affect and signs that exceed the bounds of any one given subject.

6e Studying digital populism

With regard to methodology in studies of populism, scholars have taken broadly three approaches to understanding the phenomenon – populism as a political ideology, populism as a political style and populism as a political strategy (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013). Research into populist communication has also taken similar approaches; some approaches look into the content of

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Mankekar, P. and Carlan, H., The Remediation of Nationalism. [81] See Peek, L. (2018) *Facebook's trials are just beginning*, 10 April, [Online], Available: https://thehill.com/opinion/cybersecurity/382486-facebooks-trials-are-just-beginning [11 April 2018

[82] https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/facebook-and-information-operations-v1.pdf

[83] See Chaturvedi, Swati (2016), 'I am a troll: Inside the secret world of BJP's digital army', Juggernaut Books.

[84] See Singh, A. (2018) *Exclusive: Cambridge Analytica Pitched Election Strategy To Congress, Boss Met Rahul Gandhi, Say Sources*, 16 April, [Online], Available: https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/cambridge-analytica-pitched-election-strategy-to-congress-boss-met-rahul-gandhi-say-sources-1838229 [16 April 2018]

populist communication, some into the form of communication and others into the motives behind such communication. A vital approach towards populist political communication that potentially has a significant bearing on this proposal is to look into 'the populist actor or messenger of 'populist communication'[85].

While there is some amount of debate over whether the 'charismatic leader' is an essential part of populism, the role of the populist actor as a communicative agent is of quite some importance online. Two processes at play make online communication by populist politicians of considerable consequence – the affordance of interactivity provided by the internet and the increasing evidence of 'personalization of politics'. Research has found that as politics has become more dependent upon the personal traits of politicians such actors seek to project specific attributes through their online presence[86]. Both these processes have been found to positively impact political mobilisation as people feel more involved in the political process through these personalized interactions online. Personalized communication acts as a force multiplier on the interactive affordances provided by online spaces[87]. This research seeks to draw upon these developments as they are of methodological consequence with regard to the potentially populist visual articulation and populist publics coming into being through such articulations.

In terms of the concrete material that serves as data for such research, populist ideology and rhetoric have been investigated through parliamentary debates, party platforms, media appearances, the populist party's media representations etc. Online corpora have only recently been serving as data for research into populist publics. Ekman used Critical Discourse Analysis fruitfully to look at populist websites online and the discursive strategies they employ for maligning immigrants, which helps them increase their networking potential[88]. Sakki and Pettersson look into the discursive construction of 'Otherness' in populist blogs in Scandinavian

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[85] See Engesser, S., Fawzi, N. and Larsson, A.O. (2017) 'Populist online communication: introduction to the special issue', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 20, no. 9

[86] See Stanyer, J. (2008) 'Elected representatives, online self-presentation and the personal vote: Party, personality and webstyles in the United States and United Kingdom', *Information, Community & Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 414-432

[87] See Kruikemeier, S., Van Noort, G., Vliegenthart, R. and De Vreese, C.H. (2013) 'Getting closer: The effects of personalized and interactive online political communication', *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 53-66

[88] Ekman, M. (2015) 'Online Islamophobia and the politics of fear: manufacturing the green scare', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 38, no. 11, pp. 1986-2002

countries[89]. Thus, online communication analysis can be fruitfully mined for analytical insights into populist tendencies and the discursive instruments utilised for populist framing. Such an approach will benefit this research.

7 Chapterisation

This thesis has seven chapters – one introductory chapter, five main chapters and then a concluding chapter.

Introduction

The **introductory chapter** lays down the research questions, followed by an extensive section on methodology and rationale for data collection. A literature review section follows thereafter, introducing the main concepts of the thesis. We then provide a detailed conceptual history of populism and its different approaches. The introduction further spells out the larger concerns framing the research – the binaries between text and image, high and low culture, publics and counter-publics etc. It also has a brief discussion on the history of visuality in Indian politics.

The questions that this thesis aims at answering will be a part of this chapter. The extensive methodology section deals with the process employed to gather data and answer these questions. The methodology section will carry the burden of justifying the chosen process and the data collection sites.

Chapter 1

The **first chapter** is titled '**Points of convergence: Media, 'style' and populism.** It provides the central conceptual argument for understanding populism through 'political style' in a highly mediatized polity. We discuss 'populism as style' as our main approach to studying populism, which analyses elements like body language, rhetorical style, political worldview, clothing etc., of the politicians. The chapter then highlights the performative aspects of political 'representation', drawing upon Hannah Pitkin and Jeffrey Alexander. We also dwell on an idea that runs against conventional wisdom, that of the poetics of the creation of a 'people' by a 'representative' through the works of Thomas Manin and Lisa Disch. This is followed by a section

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[89] Sakki, I. and Pettersson, K. (2016) 'Discursive constructions of otherness in populist radical right political blogs', *European journal of social psychology*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 156-170

on the 'mediatization of politics', showing how the media is inseparable from a discussion on populism and 'political style'. This inextricable link has now migrated to social media. We examine the links of bodily 'representation' of politicians with the exercise of power and sovereignty in the name of the 'people', particularly in South Asia. This 'imagistic' representation of politicians also requires a re-examination of the corporeal and symbolic roles played by the figure of the political leader and their linkages to sovereignty, and thus, there are sections regarding this in the chapter. We then take a look at the trajectory of populism in the Global South and India, and the evolution of media through India's colonial and post-colonial times. We conclude with a comprehensive look at the history of visual performance by the PM in terms of 'style' in the offline mode since his Chief Ministerial days, as well as the different high-tech and electronic means he has used in his successful election campaigns. There is a similar section on Arvind Kejriwal.

Chapter 2

The **second chapter** is titled '**Image politics I: Historical continuity on a digital platform**'. It investigates the first set of data we collected – the official images of these three politicians on their verified social media handles. The chapter is broadly divided into thematic sections based on various idioms of self-expression used by the politicians through these images – the saintly, acetic idiom, the muscular strongman idiom, the neo-liberal consumptive idiom and the idiom of devout Hindu religiosity. Initially, we trace a certain continuity, influenced primarily by Gandhian motifs in the version of self-presentation employed, especially by the PM. We do this through the works of Rudolph and Rudolph, Peter D'Souza and others, and how asceticism is harmonised with contemporary forms of consumption. We also examine alternative sources of the ascetic idiom, a more militant image that has its roots in retroactive historiography of Hindu ascetics, and not just for the PM. We also show how this feeds into leadership with muscular, militaristic overtones that can function on its own, leading a 'people', evidenced by followers that seek to embody the leader. A section is devoted to the infrastructural-technocratic 'signalling' seen in certain images of the leaders, and problematises the populist-technocratic polarity in the 'style'-based approach to studying populism. There is, however, also a more avuncular, 'homely' and intimate style to this religiosity and efforts at connection. Alexander, Hansen and others help us understand these efforts at building an 'iconic' image that supersedes other forms of political

communication, with the average follower/user being interpellated more as a 'fan' of a celebrity seeking a corporeal connection with the leader.

Chapter 3

The **third chapter** is titled '**Image Politics II: The self(ie)-made populist**'. It continues with our first set of data, this time with the official 'selfies' of the politicians under discussion. The chapter begins with the visual political culture of India, looking at the trajectories of mediation and self-styling of the three leaders – Modi, Kejriwal and Gandhi. A thick discussion of the communicative aspects of selfies follows this. We look at how selfies perfectly fit in with the demands of modern populism for an immediate contact between leaders and people. In trying to explain how such objects enable partisan mobilisation, we analyse how a leader's bodily gestures in a selfie foster intimacy, bonhomie and a sense of empowerment in the followers. In the process, we also identify some distinctive traits of populist mobilisation in South Asia.

Chapter 4

The **fourth chapter** is titled '**Image politics III: Memes, history and identity**'. This chapter presents the second set of data, that involve user-generated memes. We explain the process and sites of data collection, coding and sampling. The data shows us how claims to historical legacy and idioms of self-expression, explored in Chapter II, are used to delegitimize the politician an ordinary citizen opposes in memes. Conversely, the legitimization is done in the mode of a 'fan' celebrating (and viciously defending) their favourite 'celebrity' leader online. The data also reveals 'inclusion', ' exclusion' and 'belonging to the nation' as the major themes in the sample collected. These thematic categories are then linked to the politics of leaders under discussion. This is followed by a section on the inter-textuality of the language of memes which weave together elements from popular culture, folklore, mythology and daily news. We then explore the play of repetition and difference that are integral to the inclusion and exclusion of identities and histories in the political narratives signalled in such memes. One section looks at memes sourced from WhatsApp, while another deals with memes in vernacular Indian languages, teasing out their respective import in terms of the larger narrative. The continued import of the idioms makes our findings concrete that a robust corporeal connection has already been established between the leader and the fan/user/follower online.

Chapter 5

The fifth chapter is titled 'Cyber-publics: Hegemony and contention'. It discusses the nature of publics that is formed around the images, selfies and memes of politicians on social media platforms. We begin by highlighting the ideological hegemony of the post-liberalisation middle-class over the media, popular culture and social media. We then have a section discussing the nature of electoral support that has propelled regimes to power in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 and 2019. We show how the figure of the political leader was important in this regard, along with political, economic and psephological considerations. Taking theoretical cues from scholars like Michael Warner, Nancy Fraser, Laurent Berlant and others, we examine the nature of the online collectives or 'publics' coalescing around the representations of politicians. We also make use of the scholarship on the publics and counter-publics formed through the circulation of texts/media. As writers like Francis Cody and Charles Hirschkind have shown, such publics have singular relationships with political leaders and require an expansion of the conception of a liberal, deliberative public sphere in the South Asian context. Conceptually speaking, we give more serious consideration to the role of circulation than production and reception in this chapter, especially regarding social imagination, in which the nature of populist politics shapes both shapes. The guiding idea has been to explore the correlations between these different kinds of publics and political support. The latter part of the chapter explains the nature of the publics forming around and through these images, an important question we have raised above.

Conclusion

This will serve as the concluding chapter, and will reiterate the key findings of this research in a concise and succinct manner, tying together the answers to the two questions posed at the beginning. This concluding chapter will also discuss the limits of this research, and the scope that exists for further research along this path.

CHAPTER I

POINTS OF COVERGENCE: MEDIA, 'STYLE' AND POPULISM

This chapter establishes the common ground between populism, personalized political leadership and digital media/social media platforms (and indeed, mass media in general). Establishing the field where the convergence between social media, populism and stylistic considerations takes place is crucial if the contemporary personalistic politics we see online is to be understood. This, in turn, is essential to understanding the strong affinity that the media has to this strand of politics, and indeed has been an important factor in its success. Social media platforms, in particular, have a set of characteristics eminently suited for such politics, as this and succeeding chapters will show. These platforms host performativity, and the circulation of such performances is also made possible by them. The chapter also lays out the revised thinking on the question of political leaders being 'representatives' of a 'people', and the poesis involved.

The chapter begins with an elaboration on the populism as 'style' approach. Then it goes to unwrap the concepts of performativity in the political 'theatre' and its links to the corporeal and cultural registers of leadership. We also discuss in detail how recent conceptions of 'representation' and 'representative' have changed and how crucial the leader is in the formation of the 'people' he represents. Mediatization of politics is a running theme throughout the chapter, and we focus on how social media has changed political communication between politicians and voters, especially in the Global South. We narrow our focus after that to look at the trajectories of mediated populism and the media in post-colonial India. We end the chapter with a detailed discussion of how aesthetic considerations have played a role in the political career of the current Prime Minister since his time as the Chief Minister of Gujarat and the various trajectories his 'style' has taken, online and offline. Similar aspects of Kejriwal are also discussed.

1 Populism as style

The most significant scholarly works on populism maintained (to varying degrees) a distinction between the *form* and *content* of populism; the manner of communication by populist entities was contrasted to policy formulations. Canovan, Taguieff and Knight had already broached the issue of populism being more do with a certain 'style' rather than a universal 'content'[90]. In some cases,

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[90] See Knight, Alan. 1998. "Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, especially Mexico". *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30(2): 223–48, Canovan, Margaret. 1999. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy". *Political Studies* 47(1): 2–16 and Taguieff, P. 1995. "Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem, *Telos* 103: 9–43.

populism was reduced to a particular manner of political communication. The displacement of such 'mannerism' of communication from relative negligence to analytical centre-stage culminated in the work of Benjamin Moffitt. Moffitt intends 'political style' to be used as an analytical category or analytical frame and defines it as:

> 'the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life' (Moffitt, 2016, p. 37)

Moffitt picks up on a thread that has long been at the margins of thinking on populism - the consideration of form and its relation to content. He draws from the work of Ankersmit, Hariman and others to show that issues of fashion, the presentation of a performed self in public and associated cultural tastes etc. are integral to populism (ibid., 43-45). Moreover, the category of 'style' bleeds into substance, from form into content, and the perception of style becomes more important for a significant section of the voting population. This undermines the disciplinary barriers that might have categorised these considerations to suit disciplines such as theatre studies. The discursive approach might have addressed some of them as a text, but Laclau's approach comes close, focusing on 'doing populism' and calling a 'people' into being by a leader (Laclau 2005b). The approach draws from a legacy of a few decades wherein 'style, appearance and personality' of politicians have challenged the primacy of ideology, political programme or policy decisions and emerged victorious in front of the 'apparatus' (Corner and Pels 2003:2). The ascension accompanies it to prominence of the bodily presence of the politician in terms of gestures, posture, facial expressions, dress, hairstyle and other ambiguous performances such as finger-wagging, clenched jaws and so on[91]. In such a scenario, 'style' assumes great importance in the era of personality politics[92]. All of this points to the central role of the performative aspect

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[91] See Fairclough, N. (2000) *New Labour, new language?*, Psychology Press

[92] According to Dick Pels, style is: 'heterogeneous ensemble of ways of speaking, acting, looking, displaying, and handling things, which merge into a symbolic whole that immediately fuses matter and manner, message and package, argument and ritual. It offers political rhetoric, posturing and instinct, the expression of sentiments (such as political fear, envy or loathing) and presentational techniques (such as face-work, gesticulation or dress codes) an equally legitimate place as political rationality, thus knitting together 'higher' and 'baser' style elements in a loosely coherent but powerful pattern of political persuasion'. See Pels, D. (2003) 'Aesthetic Representation and Political Style: Re-balancing Identity and Difference in Media Democracy', in Corner, J. and Pels, D. (ed.) *Media and the restyling of politics: Consumerism, celebrity and cynicism*, Sage

of political leadership in contemporary times, and Jeffrey Alexander's work is unavoidable for those taking this approach.

2 The performance of politics: Political 'actors' and the 'theatre' of politics

Jeffrey Alexander and his collaborators present us with the 'strong program' in cultural sociology, a 'dramatic' shift in the understanding of politics, especially electoral politics (Alexander and Mast 2006). In reformulating the notion of politics, Alexander counts among his antecedents and influences Emile Durkheim, Erving Goffman, Kenneth Burke, Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, scholars who have dealt with the rituality and performativity of social life (Alexander 2006). Politicians, Alexander posits, are actors who try to present their case to a 'citizen-audience' by seemingly enacting a script composed of cultural components drawn from a background cache of 'collective representations' specific to a culture[93]. In such a script, politicians usually portray their selves as protagonists of the scripted narrative and their opponents as antagonists. Successful politicians usually convince audiences that the performance they stage in accordance with the script is authentic and not crafted, while that of their antagonists lacks authenticity (Alexander 2006). Alexander attempts to bridge the gap between the symbolic and pragmatic aspects of lived social reality[94] (Alexander and Mast 2006).

There is a definite break in continuity between the modern and the pre-modern, Alexander argues, that establishes a distinction between ritual and performance. In pre-modern societies, cosmology, culture, social practices and religious rituals were tightly wound together. This is reflected in the ritualistic processes that resulted in a feeling of liminality and *communitas* in such societies. For Alexander, rituals involve a repetition of cultural content communicated through various means, and the parties involved in such rituals accepted the authenticity and validity of such cultural communication. As surplus generation and writing became a characteristic of societies, the power to dictate ritualistic performances was concentrated more and more in the hands of elites as they

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[93] See Alexander, J. (2016) 'Performance and Politics: President Obama's Dramatic Reelection in 2012', *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 130-142

[94] For Alexander, social performances and rituals are drawn from a cache of background cultural scripts, and as Paul Ricoeur had suggested, meaningful social action could be studied as a text. Alexander's methodology also takes a cue from Derrida's contention with J. L. Austin; every socio-cultural action or performance, even the most contingent and pragmatic one, is also an iteration or a citation, an attempt to fix a performed signified to a cultural script or to a signifier, resulting in a perception of authenticity

cornered the 'means of symbolic production', and the interpretation of the scripts of rituals became the prerogative of a learned class. Those not in the elite strata had little say in interpreting the rituals (Alexander 2006).

With the coming of modernity and democracy, however, societies were subjected to increased cultural differentiation and segmentation. In an era of mass politics elites were forced to seek legitimacy by staging public performances vying for power. Social power, and consequently the power of interpretation over cultural scripts, was increasingly pluralised. Such performances usually shifted from religious themes to secular, non-religious themes. The interpretation of scripts of performance is now a contingent affair, and subject to evaluation from an established class of critics of the different components of a performance – the acting, the *mis-en-scene* and so on. Thus, politicians in the modern age have an army of public relations agents, script-writers and other professionals working on every aspect of the public performance they put up. These professionalised components of a politician's performance play a key role in their performance in public, and is integral to the politician's public 'image'. Politicians are thus seen to display a 'theatrical self-consciousness in the pursuit of political power'. This element of theatricality has accompanied this mode of performative politics as a distinguishing factor from the erstwhile age of rituals (Alexander 2006).

Jeffrey Alexander's efforts, thus, give us the scope to understand symbolic action by politicians as performance by bringing together semantics and pragmatics. For Alexander, society has moved from being ritual-based to performance-based; however, a successful performance has an almost 'ritual-like' characteristic, and manages to 'fuse' together the cultural elements that have become differentiated in modern, secular societies – actors, the script, the background representations, the *mis-en-scene*, the audience. A successful performance produces the effect of 'verisimilitude', and leads to psychological identification of the citizen-audience with the politician-actor (Alexander 2006). An unsuccessful performance, on the other hand, seems contrived. There is, thus, an element of enchantment that persists even in rational and reflexive times (Alexander and Mast 2006).

With the proliferation of mass media and the concurrent wider dissemination of socio-political power, the chances of a social performance to succeed have become more contingent as the interpretive powers are exercised by a wider and more variegated audience. Indeed, given that

populations are differentiated by class, caste, religion and demographic classifications, there now exist multiple 'public spheres', as Nancy Fraser had argued, leading to even more interpretive pathways that cannot be predicted. Given that socio-political dramas are scripted as a struggle between protagonists and an antagonist (in addition to competing 'public spheres') they carry a strong flavour of agonistic politics. Even though they are akin to theatre, social dramas are marked by a precarious incumbency, with the actor's role not always privileged with a pre-fabricated script and being subjected to increased scrutiny (Alexander 2006). Alexander has investigated several empirical cases in line with his theorisations[95].

This performative aspect begs a revision of the commonly held notions with regard to 'representation' in an electoral democracy.

3 The question of representation

Conventional wisdom dictates that democratic representation (leadership roles of governance obtained through the electoral process) involves the accruing of sufficient knowledge about the represented, their interests and wishes, and acting as a mirror or mouthpiece for the constituents. This 'knowledge' or 'information' is assumed to be readily available, to be plucked through experience, memory, belonging or surveys (Saward 2006). In political theorisation, different modes of representation have been put up, distinguished along various axes. Principal among them is the 'trustee'- 'delegate'- 'politico' model; a 'trustee' is a mere instrument to convey the wish/demand of the represented, the 'delegates' have the autonomy to use knowledge and expertise to make their own decisions regarding the represented, while 'politico's are a mixture of the two. There are other models too, such as - the liberal and republican models of representation, principal-agent, informal representation etc. (Saward 2014)

These models, however, discount the creative work put in by representatives in 'claiming' to carry with them the aspirations and demands of a certain 'representation' of the constituents/electorate.

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[95] Iconic politicians such as Barack Obama, who achieve a democratic mandate from a population, act as a symbolic collective representation, infused with meanings that construct a grand narrative of binaries between a virtuous side and their antagonists locked in an electoral battle. Such exercises also serve to unify civil society, cutting across social positions so as to deliver votes and garner an electoral mandate. Politics thus becomes a process of 'black and white' evaluations rather than Habermasian rational deliberation. See Alexander, J. (2010) *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power*, Oxford University Press

Scholars have moved away from straight-forward correspondence models by drawing upon philosophical thinking that no longer considers representations to be mere supplements to the 'real' (Disch 2012). Michael Saward argues that a considerable amount of performative work goes into the act of representation. A 'claim' is made by the representative/political leader/political 'actor' that they are the best placed to represent a particular picture of the constituents that they have created ('salt of the earth', 'son of the soil', 'good people', 'common people' etc,). This resonates well with the thinking on populist leaderships that lay stress on the role of the leader in calling a 'people' into being (Saward 2006).

The role of political actors and leaders is stressed upon here as in a democracy legitimate power springs from elections and elected representatives. Bearing this in mind political thought on electoral democracies have often turned towards questions of aesthetics and performativity of political actors and representatives. Hannah Arendt remains an early exponent of this 'turn'. In her oeuvre Arendt has always equated political 'action' with freedom, the freedom to bring into being something new (she contrasts action with necessity-driven 'labour' and 'work'). For Arendt political actors and leaders are *virtuosos* who put up a performance for a plurality of human beings (Arendt considers human beings to be always oriented towards a multitude, as 'men, not man, inhabit the world'). This then becomes the political art of bringing a *demos* into being, much as the public speakers in the *agoras* of ancient Greece did. Here, the performance itself is the means and the end; there is no end result beyond the performance. The *doing* matters more than any *telos* (Arendt 2006).

The principal theoretical edifice against which Saward builds his thought is Hannah Pitkin's ground-breaking 'The Concept of Representation', published in 1957. Lisa Disch, similarly, uses Pitkin's work as the spring-board for her theorisation vis-a-vis representation. Disch's picks on a thread in Pitkin's work that hints towards the creative component of political leadership. "making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact" (Disch 2012).

However, unlike Saward, Disch detects in Pitkin's works already a push towards the 'quasi-performative' nature of democratic representation. For Disch, Pitkin's use of the term 'quasi-performative' is strategic, as the 'claims' made by political actors of representing a constituency is always a provisional relationship between the representative and the represented, not absolute.

The claim is also a 'responsibility' which the representatives have taken up (Disch 2011). Saward makes a similar argument - the representative 'claim' is always up for challenge, during the course of their candidature as well as during elections (Saward 2006).

Thus, each such 'claim' is an attempt at articulating that the political actor is satisfactorily representing the constituency (or state or nation) and to this end, 'offers a construction or portrayal of herself and of her object (constituency or nation)'. Also, '[at] the heart of the act of representing is the depicting of a constituency as this or that, as requiring this or that, as having this or that set of interests' (Disch 2012). The actions of representatives are 'ascribed' to such constructions of the represented, and this ascription may be challenged. There is also a reflexive component to this representation process, as the constituents, being represented who are also in a way the audience of this performance, come to view themselves as the 'represented'. The operationalisation of the term 'audience' here by Saward and others is specific here, as an 'audience' to the 'performance' of the representative (Saward 2006). The audience may or may not be the same as the constituents or voters. This is a dynamic relationship, and the responsiveness of the constituents is an important factor as well (Severs 2010).

Sometimes representation can also occur in a non-elected manner, with the claim to representation made through routes other than the electoral process. This can still be plebiscitary in other ways, measured in popularity or celebrityhood. Such mantles of representation may still enjoy legitimacy. Such claims can succeed because they have the flexibility to be overtly partial and have the tenacity to last longer electoral cycles. These claims can be based on the appeals of traditional ties and forms of authority, technical expertise etc. Such claims facilitate the claims made through extra-institutional means i.e. by celebrities as well as leaders of social movements and social activists. It can also be used by 'voices from the street' (Saward 2009). With regard to the present discussion on populism, the representative positionality taken up by media-persons is of special significance. The media is intricately tied to the contemporary manifestations of populism.

Media, both the electronic 'mass' forms as well as 'social media' forms, serve as enablers of populism, often structurally, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes wilfully. One trend that aids in this across the board is the 'emotionalisation', 'simplification', 'sports-based dramatisation', 'polarisation', obsession with scandals and revelations, emphasis on the visual aspects over all

else etc., seen especially in the 'talk-show' format of news, usually with a popular, grand-standing host (Krämer 2014). These hosts instantiate well the non-elected representatives discussed above, especially with regard to populism. Saurette and Gunster argue that such hosts usually preside over a TV debate form they have monikered 'argutainment', which involves fiery confrontation laden with a high degree of intense emotional displays among the participants. This is done in the name of representing the views of the 'common people' of the nation; as such, a certain narrow slice of experience of a certain section of the population is privileged as the source of legitimate knowledge as expert opinion, statistical data, academic research etc. are downplayed as 'elitist'. Sauretter and Gaunster call this 'epistemological populism' (Saurette and Gunster 2011).

Since the representation then occurs in the register of a 'claim' it is open to contestation, and a mandate has to be sought through elections. The best way to ensure acceptance of the claims of representation made is to draw upon the pre-existing notions extant in a constituency, or as Jeffrey Alexander had proposed (as discussed above) a consonance between the script drawn from the cultural cache of that society and the successful performance of the script. The repeated allusion to performativity and performance here is not just in the terms discussed above (bodily comportment, manners of speaking, clothes etc.) but also in terms of the performativity embedded in certain utterances that J.L. Austin had said, rather innocuously, allows one to 'do things with words', such as calling a 'people' into being. A successful claim to representation vests a great amount of power in the hands of the elected leader, and can result in the exclusion of certain groups or communities from the definition of the 'people'. Or socio-economic elites may usurp all the tools and resources involved in the making of claims to representation.

4 Populist leadership in the socio-cultural register

For Moffit, the opposite end of the spectrum of political style that seems to be the polar opposite of populism is the technocratic style. Again, these are to be understood in terms of embodied performance, not deeply held ideological beliefs or policy proposals (Moffitt, 2016).

Given what has been discussed above in terms of democratic representation being a performative process, we find ourselves returning again and again to Laclau's formulation of populism, with the pivotal role played by the leader. In this schema, the 'name of the leader' serves as the 'empty signifier' around which the various unfulfilled demands of a population start forming

'equivalential chains' chains and leads to the formation of a 'people'(Laclau 2005b). Some scholars do tend to focus on populist political parties as well, but overwhelmingly it is the leader who is the driver of populist politics. Some political parties exist solely as vehicles for such leaders, and some others end up becoming vehicles to varying degrees (for instance, the BJP and Narendra Modi).

Such leaders need to perform a delicate balancing act, bearing all the markers of 'ordinariness' of the 'common people' while at the same time seemingly overcoming this very 'ordinariness' (and perhaps implicit impoverishment of power) and grappling for power with the establishment. To the follower/supporter of a populist leader 'importantly, the leader is both like me (a "me" with no cultural titles) and an ego ideal—but one that is accessible and understandable' (Ostiguy 2017). The populist leader must also bear markers of being an 'outsider' to the political establishment, unblemished or 'untainted' ('dirtiness' is perhaps the closest Indian expression in this regard) by the rough and tumble and scheming of this realm. Now, Moffit places populism in a spectrum with technocracy rather than pluralism, as he professes that this has more analytical and explanatory efficacy in terms of populism as a style. And populists take recourse to what Moffit calls 'bad manners' to mark themselves off as distinct from the establishment (Moffitt 2016).

How do political leader's display these markers of distinction from the establishment? For Moffit this is done through a display of 'bad manners', a category that can include everything from crass, crude, uncouth language, mannerisms and body language to a stress on localised masculine presentation to all the 'folksy' traits that are considered to be imbibed by the 'common people' or the people of the 'heartland'. This is contrasted to the language of the establishment - 'techno-cratic', formalised, 'appropriate' - which separates them from the masses or 'people' (Moffitt 2019).

Moffit drawn from Pierre Ostiguy's placement of populist politics in the 'high-low' cultural axis, which, again, is an extra-discursive level of analysis, focussing on accents, corporeal expressions and gestures, clothing and other such ways of 'relating to a people'. The high-low axis runs 'orthogonal' to the left-right (-wing) axis, and almost leads to a two-dimensional mapping of extant politics, with left-low, left-high, right-low and right-high (Ostiguy 2009). Cultural and geography are strong determinants of what falls at the two poles of this axis, and are not invariant

across different contexts, linked with 'a society's history, existing group differences, identities, and resentments' (Moffitt 2019).

Ostiguy further sub-divides this axis into its socio-cultural and political-cultural components. The socio-cultural axis deals with the aspects mentioned above such as way of speaking and dressing; at the lower end of the axis one finds the more unrefined, 'culturally popular', 'raw' manifestation of these aspects while at the higher end one finds the polished, rationalised and replete with technical jargon. While the former may ingratiate one to the 'masses' the former runs the risk of making one seem boring and distant. Here one must pause for the caveat that being on the lower end of the axis need not always mean one belongs to the poor and the marginalised sections alone. To this end, Ostiguy furnishes the example of George W. Bush, the scion of the wealthy and politically powerful Bush family and Silvio Berlusconi (Donald Trump, perhaps, could be added to this list) (Ostiguy 2017). There is a certain appeal to the 'heartland', a certain sense of belonging-ness (and pride in the same) attached to the lower end of the axis, which is not the case with the higher end, which is associated with 'cosmopolitanism' and globally accepted norms that is the domain of the well-heeled (Ostiguy 2009). The higher end of the axis lends itself to a 'impersonal, legalistic, institutionally mediated' style of governance. The lower end translates into a paternalistic, personalized and often hyper-masculine style (Ostiguy refers to the 'ballsy'-ness of Latin American populists). There is a marked hostility towards what is considered 'political correctness' of the 'elite' that the technocratic leaders supposedly display from populists, and being 'politically incorrect' is considered a rebellious act against the 'elite'. The 'political correctness' that is railed against often involves language employed by establishment that supposedly coddles minorities, immigrants etc. at the expense of the 'people' (Ostiguy 2017).

An important interjection at this point would be to point out that Moffit does not see technocracy and populism as a binary but as a spectrum. Even technocrats need to appeal to popular sensibilities. Thus, even Barack Obama may be found discussing his leisure activities which he shares in common with a large majority of the American electorate.

Moffit's comparative approach proves beneficial here as it allows him to draw examples from across the globe. This includes leaders from across the political divide such as Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, with his fiery rhetoric hostile to traditional elites allied to 'Yankees' to Netherlands's

Geert Wilders whose gripes include the 'Islamization' of Europe. Donald Trump is a very prominent example from recent times who has taken on the role of the entertainer (from his past experience as a reality TV star) who says the politically incorrect 'unsayable' (vulgarity and discriminatory slurs) to great success (Moffitt 2019). Another example from the Global North would be Beppe Grillo, the comedian who is the leader of the 5 Star Movement (M5S) in Italy which has till recently been in power in alliance with the far-right outfit Northern League. Such leaders are especially well-known for their vicious and relentless attacks on their opponents. In the Global South, Moffit finds similar behaviour in leaders such as Zambia's Michael Sata who called his better-educated opponent a 'calculator boy', South Africa's Jacob Zuma, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni who regularly uses homophobic slurs to mobilise etc. (Moffitt 2016).

5 The image of the sovereign: Corporeal authority

Thinking of political authority (and politics in general) in corporeal terms is a tradition that, of course, harkens back to Hobbes's Leviathan. The iconic cover-art, *Frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan*, by Abraham Bosse lays out the now well-known formulation of Hobbes with the bearer of sovereign power as the head bearing the crown, while the subjects constitute the body (to put it in rather simplistic terms). Carl Schmitt provides a more extensive description:

> 'A gigantic man, composed of innumerable midgets, holding in his right hand a sword and in the left one a crosier, guarding a peaceful city. Under each arm, the secular as well as the spiritual, there is a column of five drawings: under the sword a castle, a crown, a cannon; then rifles, lances, and banners, and finally a battle; to these correspond, under the spiritual arm: a church, a mitre, thunderbolts; symbols for sharpened distinctions, syllogisms, and dilemmas; and, finally, a council' (Schmitt 2008)

For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to note that it is to the person of the sovereign that each individual of the populace 'irrevocably' cedes some parts of their liberty and authority over themselves (Hobbes, 1968). Erich Kantorowicz later detects a separation in this body into two - a body of flesh and blood that dies and a 'body politic', composed of subjects with the sovereign constituting the head, that is undying. Any revolt against the Sovereign is discouraged, because it would lead to the death of the 'body politics', returning the populace to a brutal state of existence in *bellum omnium contra omnes* (Kantorowicz 1957). This 'body politic' is given form in certain quite biological terms by Hobbes. The circulation of goods and currency is

considered akin to the flow of blood in the body that is necessary for the nutrition and survival of the 'body politic'. When wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few or monopolies, it leads to 'pleurisy' of the 'blood' and leads to diseases afflicting the 'body politic'(Fabrizzi 2018). Such a manner of conceptualisation by Hobbes is hardly surprising when one considers his friendship with William Harvey, who was the first to come up with a systematic treatise on blood circulation in the human body. However, the 'body politic' is by no means a 'natural body'; it is an 'artificial man' with an 'artificial soul', and the pact made by the governed with the Ruler arises not out of any natural arrangement and is by no means organic. Hobbes was quite taken with the emergent scientific theories of his age, and his conception of the 'body politic' was quite mechanistic (Cohen 1994).

Carl Schmitt in his corpus of work forcefully argues that most modern political philosophy owes its etymology to secularised political theology. He is especially opposed to liberal representative theories of government and sovereignty, because of its preponderance for a 'economic' rationale driving politics that is dependent on numerical aggregation of voters. This is a shift away from political authority derived from personal authority, which was the model Hobbes espoused. For Schmitt, the ideal model for sovereignty is based on the Roman Catholic Church and its legacy of Roman juridical law. Unlike liberal or republican (or perhaps Weberian) ideas of authority based on electoral numerical majority for Schmitt the ideal model for political authority is that of the Church, wherein the Pope has the power and mandate derived directly from the person of Jesus Christ, his 'becoming-human' and being crucified. The Church then becomes a corporatist 'body' of all devout Catholic practitioners with the Pope at the helm. Juridical power requires embodiment in a real body of a person, Schmitt argues, and therefore his push for a 'personalistic' mode of sovereign authority (Kahn 2009).

Erich Kantorowicz is seemingly concerned with the Church and the body of Christ, especially the rituals of the Eucharist (wherein a symbolic body of Christ is consumed in the form of wafers, and the blood of Christ in the form of wine). The modern idea of a tangible, consolidated political formation such as a state or a political community, for Kantorowicz, is derived from the theological debates and the amorphous historical trajectory of concepts such as *corpus christi*, *corpus verum* and *corpus mysticum*. With the passage of time *corpus mysticum* was shorn of

mystical significance, and came to stand for the 'body' constituted by the faithful Christians, while *corpus verum* was the physical body of Christ (Fabrizzi 2018).

Claude Lefort launches a severe critique of this approach to political power in his works, especially in the essay 'The image of the body under totalitarianism'. Lefort takes into account the secularisation of politics thesis espoused by Schmitt and Kantorowicz, focussing especially on the corporeal imaginary of the European body politic. Lefort, however, operationalises 'society' as a category instead of a political community alone. Society is visualised, as has been discussed above, undergirded by the body of Jesus Christ, was politically mapped onto the personage of the sovereign king's two bodies, and the fallible, decaying body of the reigning king occupied the place of the head of the body politic. However, with the process of democratisation that gradually began in the West in the 18th century, individuality and a mode of government that grew more and more impersonal (a shift away from 'personalistic' governmental power) and bureaucratic meant that the image of the body politic was collapsing and 'disincorporating'. The 'democratic revolution' had 'decapitated' the body politic, and society could no longer be mapped in the figure of a body. The promulgation of (gradually) universalising suffrage meant that numerical aggregation trumped any notion of a substantial body composed by the people. The determinant power in the fields of power, law and knowledge disaggregated. In this decapitated polity the 'place of power is empty', and can be occupied only temporarily. Societal cleavages came to the fore and could no longer be subsumed in corporeal terms. For Lefort, society became 'ungraspable' for discourses of power, and the entirety of the social could not be confined within the boundaries of any episteme.

However, this social 'indeterminacy' proves to be difficult, especially in times of crisis. This can lead to certain political actors and groups to promise a re-inscription of society in a legible body that is comprehensible, and perhaps 'graspable', to assuage anxieties. This is an episteme of power that claims a homogenous society that is completely transparent to its scrutiny, and determinate knowledge of which is readily available, leading to the image of a 'People-as-one'. And where exists the 'People-as-one', all internal differences and indeterminacies papered over, there also looms the spectre of the Other as the enemy to be extirpated, excommunicated or eliminated. At the head of this resurrected 'body politic' lies the political leader (or Egocrat, as Lefort calls that claims to represent the whole of society (excluding the 'malevolent', adversarial Other). This

head not only stands for itself but is a part that represents the whole; the figure of the political leader represents the whole of the 'People', as the head swallows up the body and vice-versa. The leader

> 'offers his own body — individual, mortal, endowed with all the virtues…… A mortal body which is perceived as invulnerable, which condenses in itself all strengths, all talents, and defies the laws of nature by his super-male energy' (Lefort and Thompson 1986:300)

6 Mediatization of politics

According to Hjarvard, although mediatisation has been a gradual process, it has accelerated quickly from the last years of twentieth century onwards, predominantly in highly industrialised societies. Within this historical context, mediatisation can be viewed as a process by which certain spheres of life (politics, culture, family and so on) are "to an increasing degree . . . submitted to, or [become] dependent on, the media and their logic". Mediatisation can be broadly understood as the process "whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence"(Hjarvard 2008). It has affected the shape of populism, and how populism adapts elements of 'media logic' to politics in increasingly effective ways. Media mediation can be understood as "communication via a medium, the intervention of which can affect both the message and the relationship between sender and recipient" (Hjarvard 2013: 19).

Krotz refers to mediatisation as a "meta-process", as it is not linear, does not have a stable beginning or end, nor is confined to a particular culture or region. Other meta-processes include industrialisation, globalisation, individualisation and commercialisation. However, for purposes of conceptual clarity and consensus within the literature, the term 'process' is used here to describe mediatisation (Krotz 2007).

To speak of the 'mediatisation of politics' is thus to claim these types of techniques, trends and narrative logics increasingly shape contemporary politics—a claim not particularly surprising or controversial to any political observer today. In such a situation 'media logic' colonises 'political logic', which involves both a policy dimension—finding solutions to political issues—and a process dimension—the efforts to get others to accept your solution. Under mediatisation, such

policy and process dimensions become increasingly beholden to the rhythms, demands and processes of media logic as noted above (Meyer and Hinchman 2002).

Esser and Strömbäck define mediatization as "a long-term process through which the importance of news media as an institution, and their spill-over effects on political processes and political institutions, has increased", and media institutions, technologies, practices, and affects are shaping the context and currency of political action and expression (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014).

7 The political leader and mediated populism

There exists a potential for the argument that the visual corpora being discussed here – official visuals such as selfies, and memes – have emerged in a milieu of populism, both online and offline. The definition of populism has a variegated and contentious history (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013), but one of its enduring features remains the discursive interpellation of a 'people' by a leader (against supposedly corrupt 'elites', 'others' etc.). In consonance with the Gramscian notion of 'Bonapartism' such leaders usually emerge in times of crisis in democratic systems[96]. India, too, has been witness to multiple such crises in recent times on the socio-economic and political fronts. In addition, newly emergent entreprenurial and professional classes have expressed a disillusionament with the traditional modes of politics in India for quite some time, and this has provided further nutrients to a fertile substrate where populism can flourish (this was strongly in evidence during the 'India Against Corruption' movements of 2010-2011)[97]. A shift has been noted through this populist trend whereby the earlier modes of electoral strategizing, which focused on mobilising voters, have been eschewed in favour of 'political campaigns' that have come to 'resemble personality-centered marketing operations'[98].

In the contemporary times when various socio-political institutions and interactions among them are increasingly 'mediatized'[99], populism has also inevitably been mediatized. Consequently, the construction of the leader and the 'people' are also to a large degree mediatized, and social media

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[96] See Caruso, L. (2016) 'Gramsci's political thought and the contemporary crisis of politics', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 136, no. 1

[97] See Chakravarty, P. and Roy, S. (2015) 'Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi: Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian elections', *Television and New Media*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 311-322

[98] See Rajagopal, A. (2016) 'The Rise of Hindu Populism in India's Public Sphere. ', *Current History*, April, pp. 123-129

[99] See Hjarvard, S. (2008) 'The Mediatization of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change', *Nordicom Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 105– 34

has started playing an increasing role in this, along with the older mass media (Sinha 2017). Populist leaders are stereotypically seen to have a media-genic and charismatic personality, and this results in them garnering great amount of attention in both traditional and new media, Social media especially allows populist leaders to evade the possible 'gate-keeping' mechanisms and disapproval of mainstream media (usually painted as 'elite' media antagonistic to the 'people'). In India this is the case with the English-language media, and this section of the media was successfully undermined by Narendra Modi's electoral campaign. In fact, scholars have posited that Modi's social media presence often resulted in dictating the terms under which the coverage of the 2014 electoral campaign was carried out by the mainstream media. Social media often allows populist leaders to bypass the traditional media and communicate with the people directly (Schroeder 2018). The Modi campaign also created an image of itself as an 'underdog', an outsider that was at a disadvantage when it came to the traditional (English-language) media, one of the classic signs according to Gianpetro Mazzoleni of a populist campaign. Another classic sign was the enlisting of the services of a professional agency for publicity (Ogilvy & Mather) that managed its mass media and social media presence[100].

Populism and prerogative power intersect on the question of the 'trust' invested in political representatives or leaders in a democratic system. The French philosopher Bernard Manin has said that when electorates select representatives today, they are entrusted with the ability to make quick decisions in the name of the "public good" when unanticipated developments occur. Regular elections would check such exercises as they would require that leaders and regimes seek renewed mandates. To Manin the mass media of our time has turned modern representative democracy into "audience" democracies, where politicians seem to perform on a mediatised stage, and are judged on the basis of their mannerisms, sartorial styles, effectiveness of their speeches, or their other bodily attributes, including their gestures (Manin 1997:221–26). John Locke, in his Two Treatises of Government, attributed to the executive branch "prerogative" power: governments have discretion to make decisions during extraordinary circumstances not foreseen by existing legal norms (Arditi 2012). Governments may even violate existing laws for the "public good". Abraham Lincoln's executive actions during the American Civil War are often cited as an instance of this

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[100] See Mazzoleni, G. (2007) 'Populism and the Media', in Albertazzi, D. and McConnell, D. (ed.) *Twenty First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, Boulder: Palgrave Macmillan

(Mattie 2005). Populist regimes are not alone in attempting misuse of emergency or exceptional powers. The Patriot Act, passed by the United States Senate immediately after 9/11 during the Bush presidency exemplifies this, as do other draconian national security laws promulgated in a number of nations over the last two decades. 'Exceptional' laws that allow regimes to appropriate sweeping powers to conduct surveillance on citizens, indefinitely detain them, conduct 'enhanced interrogation' and otherwise contravene the spirit of constitutions and the rights of individuals are spreading around the world.

The leader-centric populism of some of the political figures under discussion here is also interspersed with memetic attributes in singular ways due to the affordances of new media. Populism is a 'thin ideology'; a populist platform usually keeps its key features 'ambiguous' and 'malleable' so that individuals can easily identify with them (Engesser et al., 2017). Thus, populist leaders can gainfully exploit the 'logic of connective action', which allows people to be a part of political movements through 'personal action frames'. Unlike the earlier logics of collective action which were based on centralized organizations attempting to enthuse people into participation through identitarian and cultural means, connective action takes place through self-motivated actions of molecularized individuals utilizing internet platforms to appropriate in a personalized manner online content relating to matters of public importance and common good. Such personalized self-expression of content through imitation and adaptation/transformation is then shared with one's networks on the internet for recognition and further sharing. Through the economies of scale of online networks such content can reach a wide number of people connected through 'weak' ties (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Digital content bearing populist messages can be very easily appropriated by individuals online to suit their own personal needs (Engesser et al., 2017). Personal action frames are thus quite similar to memes, in that they are a frame through which content is imitated, transformed and circulated widely (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

8 Mediated populism in the Global South

Personalistic politicians are not the only ones exemplifying digital populism in the social media age, however, and populist parties such as the Sweden Democrats, whose leader is not so prominent (Schroeder 2018). In the Global South an instance of this would be the South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) – led by Julius Malema, former President of African National Congress's Youth League. Malema broke away from the ANC, and his EFF is of a strongly

populist bent, having faced accusations of rioting against foreign migrant workers, many of them from other African nations in urban South Africa. EFF has disrupted the ruling African National Congress's events such as the State of the Nation Address by President Jacob Zuma through an array of disruptive mechanisms. They use live bodily symbolic action and also Twitter. They build up anticipation of drama through the usage of Twitter before events. Such parties often have online armies of digital volunteers/political workers (Sorensen 2018).

In the run-up to the 2015 State of the Nation Address to be delivered by then South African President Jacob Zuma of the ANC, Julius Malema of the EFF sends out a tweet - 'We are ready for u boy' – along with a picture of Zuma. This built-up anticipation on social media as well as mass media before the speech is delivered, and chaos ensues during the event as EFF members stage a disruption, who then have to be thrown out of the hall. This is followed by the accusation on Twitter that Zuma had barred the EFF parliamentarians from the event. Political entrepreneurs such as Malema and the EFF in the Global South have become adept at such disruptive mechanisms aimed at maximizing visibility, especially through social media. Such staged spontaneity is used to undermine the allegedly staged performances and rituals of the 'elites' (Sorensen, 2018). This populist spirit of political entrepreneurialism seems to have taken to heart Jeffrey Alexander's contention that when the artifice of performance is revealed the audience ('people') lose faith in the 'performer' (political leader) (Alexander and Mast 2006).

Fig. 1: Malema's tweet with a picture of Jacob Zuma

Source: Twitter

In Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power as a moderate party with pro-EU leanings. But over time it turned into an authoritarian party with strong religious conservative currents, winning repeated elections buoyed by a conservative, upwardly mobile Anatolian middle-class. As the Kemalist-nationalist, liberal and other media outlets were opposed to it the Erdogan government went into a campaign of persecution. Journalists were imprisoned, and ownership of media channels was transferred to businessmen sympathetic to the regime. Social media platforms proved to be an effective organizing ground during the Gezi Protests of 2013, which led to Erdogan forming a dim opinion of such platforms.

He has repeatedly tried to have such platforms banned. But the AKP now has an online army of trolls to silence opposition through vicious attacks online (Bulut and Yörük 2017).

Thailand had seen the ascent of one of Asia's most prominent populist leaders, media-moghul Thaksin Shinawatra in the early years of the decade. But Thailand has a history of military coups (in fact it holds the record for the most military coups), and in 2006 one such coup ousted Shinawatra. Since then, opposing populist movements have jostled for power, with print and electronic media taking up partisan positions. Matters are further complicated by demands for transfer of power to the royal family. Large protest mobilisations by the Royalist-loyalist and army supporting 'yellow-shirts' clash with the Shinawatra supporting 'red-shirts' clash regularly (McCargo 2017).

In India, even parties with charismatic leaders such as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have Information Technology (IT) cells and online armies of digital volunteers/political workers. AAP and BJP have volunteers not only in India but also among Non-Resident Indians (NRI). AAP volunteers produce and share content on social media to popularize the party's activities and attract citizens – also, rebut attacks made on them by the BJP. Skirmishes play out in comments sections and Tweets (Webb 2020) (Chaturvedi 2016).

Research suggests that in most low- and middle-income countries, where often only a small (and typically young) group of economic elite uses social media (Leetaru et al. 2013), the reasons for being online need not be voter conversion. Studies show that leaders in and out of power have a range of motivations for being online (Barberá and Zeitzoff 2018), regardless of the kind of political system in place (Reuter and Szakonyi 2012). For most politicians, social media are primarily a means of presenting themselves as likable—an impression-management activity (Lilleker and Jackson 2010). There is sufficient evidence that national leaders, including in much of the global South, invest in social media irrespective of actual voters' use of social media (Pal and Gonawela 2016). Examiners of media outreach in Modi's 2014 campaign have proposed that social media engagement was about organizing a popular discourse of modernity and development around Modi (Jaffrelot 2015), which distances the more negative news media attention around his association with Hindutva antecedents, refocusing instead on a technology-savvy modern image (Kaur 2015).

9 The colonial and post-colonial roots of mediated populism in India

The trajectory of mediated populism in India reflects similar histories in the Global South that tasted sovereignty as modern-states in the 20th century as the colonial masters retreated across the oceans, leaving behind the skeletal and muscular infrastructure upon which to embellish the post-colonial state. It is essential to map the specificities of this trajectory, which can tend to have peculiarities of its own according to the area. For instance, in India, the binary of a 'liberal', more deliberative media establishment contra a more sensationalist, 'tabloid', insurgent media does not strictly apply as it does in the West, especially in terms of such a 'media field' having an impact on populist politics. Nor is it sufficient to ascribe populist politics to media manipulation unleashing repressed anger, the contemporary electoral landscape (and manipulation thereof) and so on (Chakravartty and Roy 2017). Populist politics (for the purposes of this discussion in India, but also in the world at large) may be traced back to some of the originary developments that shaped democracy as we understand it today.

There are two inter-linked dynamics to which Partha Chatterjee locates the periodic ebb and flow of populism. The first is that of vanguard-ism, where a social grouping takes it upon itself to propel a society, a nation or a populace into a qualitatively new arrangement of political and economic power. Sometimes it is done voluntarily, sometimes not; Chatterjee here draws from Gramsci to demonstrate that in the case of the French Revolution the Jacobins more-or-less dragged the French bourgeoisie forward. In the modern period, such a role is usually accompanied by a claim to epistemic certainty of the inner workings of history and society, and what lies in the best interests of that society. The role was played by different political factions in different societies, such as the Bolshevik Party in Russia and the Kemalists in Turkey (Chatterjee 2020:42-43,62). It was not necessarily a revolutionary role; Chatterjee mobilises Gramsci's notion of passive revolution to explain this and points out that the struggle for dominance and or hegemony among social classes was an important factor in this movement of history. Instead of a Hegelian ideal state, where there was a healthy separation between the state and civil society, one could only find an integral state in most of the world in modernity. The ruling class exercised hegemony over both the state and civil society, mostly through consent after political reforms introduced democratic modes such as universal suffrage. This was done to keep possible the extractive activities of capital (ibid. 74).

In formerly colonized countries such as India, civil society and the state were linked differently. Instead of the Occidental route, a bureaucratic structure and certain political rights were laid upon Indian society from above by colonial authorities. The post-colonial state inherited a structure that was interested more in extraction of value from human subjects and natural resources rather than fostering consent for hegemony. This meant that dominance, and not hegemony, was exercised over those on the margins in India by the ruling class. There arose a loose arrangement of social, political and economic elites, parts of which were also a part of the anti-colonial struggle, that assumed the reins of power after independence. This consortium was responsible for charting the course for the rest of the population in terms of 'developmentalist' policy-making (Kaviraj 1988). The integral state had to be extended 'tactically' in the post-colony. Chatterjee introduces the category of the 'political' society for the neo-liberal post-colony. Those with the material, social and cultural resources enjoy political rights and the protection of the rule-of-law (thus constituting the 'civil society'). Those that were dispossessed, whose labour power was rendered 'unnecessary' by neo-liberal capitalism and were sentenced to the margins of society, and their welfare became a matter of political expediency. This constituted what Chatterjee calls 'political society' (Chatterjee 2007). But since they constituted a significant bloc of votes and political power, they could bargain for some targeted measures that ensured their subsistence from the ruling class, and thus the integral state had to be 'tactically extended' (Chatterjee 2020:81).

For Chatterjee, the distinction between the terms 'population' and 'people' are crucial in a Foucauldian sense. Along with the bourgeoisie and the 'developmentalist' vanguards in the Global North as well as the newly independent nations, the bureaucracy emerged as the fulcrum for the scientific 'government' of a population. New methods of measuring the attributes of both individuals and any collective of human beings and systematically gathering and analysing this data was crucial to the administration of a nation-state or a colony (ibid. 60). After the advent of the welfare state, the needs and fulfilment of individuals and societies was in accordance with such data. Politics, especially after neo-liberalism, started supplanting the welfare state and was concerned solely with the correct 'technology' that yielded maximal results with the least amount of resources allocated for human benefit. Targeted policies became the order of the day, designed by experts with sophisticated means of data gathering. Political parties cutting across ideological lines bowed before the wisdom of technical expertise and technocracy (ibid. 67).

The countervailing political force that emerged to this technically administered 'population' was the 'people'. In order for political revolutions and the anti-colonial movements to succeed those belonging to the lower strata of societies had to mobilise. The covenant between the vanguard and the people dictated that for their struggles they would have an equitable share in political power and material prosperity. With neo-liberal technocracy, both in post-colonial societies such as India and now in the West, the conditions were ripe for the rise of populism based on claims to popular sovereignty. In India populism was also fuelled by increasing political potency of regional, linguistic elites and dominant castes that challenged the dominance of the metropolitan, English-speaking Nehruvian vanguard (ibid., 89).

The role of the media as envisaged by the post-colonial developmentalist media was not the free, critical enterprise it is commonly understood to be today. It was to be a part of the pedagogical enterprise of development, instructing the illiterate, not-modern-yet masses on the correct comportments and dispositions required to be productive part of the modern nation-state. This included a particular historiography that sometimes clashed methodologically with the established folk histories in the local dialect. It is the masses, seen as 'unruly', 'infantile' subjects, who are required to be kept in check from excesses rather than the state, and tutored in the way of being a people invested in national development. This state-aligned media was thus already a part of an enterprise that was involved in the production of a 'people', or rather 'we are the people', in a discourse that Chakravarty and Roy call 'statist civic nationalist'. The developmental state and the media aligned to it took up this mantle of tutelage and placed its enterprise in a space that was deemed to be above the grubby, 'dirty', 'petty' politics on the ground, as was portrayed in the popular information and entertainment media content (Chakravartty and Roy 2017). The emergence of contemporary populism and populist leaders as 'extraordinary' entities not stained by the regular rough-and-tumble of institutional, electoral politics can also be traced to this. After market liberalisation, it became easy for private players to position themselves as 'independent' rebels criticizing the excesses of the state, and build an ideological consensus for the free market as the panacea for these ills. The political field continued to be seen as 'dirty'; only now all state-led initiatives were painted as 'corrupt' and 'inefficient' in the popular imaginary (caused in no small part by the massive rent-seeking scams exposed regularly) (Chakravartty and Roy 2015).

In the burgeoning private media sector, those creating news and entertainment content in India's many vernacular languages constituted a huge chunk, and witnessed spectacular growth. The old English-speaking Nehruvian vanguard was challenged by an emergent 'new elite' which owned these media outlets, financed by liberalization-fuelled booms in sectors such as real estates. In this 'networked media system', as Roy and Chakravarty call it, one sees a desire for social mobility and accruing potency based on caste position, rather than straight-forward political partisanship. Due to the same structural reasons seen across the world, Indian private media outlets' push for higher TRPs meshes well with the highly emotive, sensational, pithy, simplified messages of populists (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015) (Chakravartty & Roy, 2017).

10 Populism's trajectory in India

India has seen multiple manifestations of populism, such as the agrarian populism of Charan Singh and the Dravidian, middle-caste populism of Southern India. There have been different constellations of the 'elite' and the 'people' (Subramanian, 2007) (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017).

Indira Gandhi's rule may serve as a model for the national populist leader who sought to embody the unity of a 'people' in herself. She under-cut the established party structure of the Congress with 'notables' in positions of power at various levels in her quest to centralize all power in herself. The bureaucracy also served as an extension of her will and vision. The morphing of state-led welfare policies that are ideally a right of under-privileged citizens into displays of munificence towards subjects by a benevolent ruler in exchange for their support arguably started under her (and in the popular press populism has most often denoted such transactional policies) (Chatterjee 2020:89). While usually labelled 'socialist' for her policies of Green Revolution, land reform, bank nationalization, targeted policies for the poor and rhetoric of poverty alleviation, she catered to the interests of the bourgeoisie, the urban middle-class and the big land-owning farmers as well to maintain her base of support. As the populist leader in whom was embodied the nation and its people, Indira's enemies became enemies of India (much as 'India is Indira and Indira is India'). These enemies kept transferring metonymically, sometimes external threats such as Pakistan, sometimes internal ones such as those opposed to her Emergency measures and suspension of democracy. Her image was ubiquitous in the press and the state-owned radio and TV channels (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017).

The strains of populism seen in the Southern states Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh has also thrown up interesting models of populist leaders and politics that may illuminate certain contemporary strands. In Tamil Nadu the anti-Brahmin, anti-Brahminism and anti-Sanskritic movement led by Periyar later led to the formation of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and was initially based on a secessionist Tamil nationalism (Subramanian 2007). They ousted the Congress from power in the State, and drew their support by railing against attempts to impose Hindi. As such they drew their symbolic power from 'plebeian' Tamil cultural forms and language. Their support base consisted of intermediate and backward castes, and scholars have argued the welfare policies were clientelistic in nature, which sought to provide food and housing to the poor. It is after the splitting of the DMK and the formation of the AIADMK by MGR that one sees the proper emergence of paternalistic (and maternalistic, when Jayalalitha came to power) leaders whose figures embody the will of the 'people' (Chatterjee 2020). This crop of leaders had a background as wildly popular film-stars, and their real and cinematic biographies tended to dovetail into political appeal. In Andhra Pradesh it was N.T. Rama Rao who translated his super-stardom into a career as a very successful politician and Chief Minister who plank was built on the amelioration of the plight of the Telugu people exploited by the Congress party at the State and the Central levels. These political parties and actors coupled their welfare policies (including trail-blazing ones such as mid-day meal schemes in government schools) with the courting of national and international capital, encouraging investment, while also supporting local small and middle-range entrepreneurs (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017).

The relevance of the imagiastic portrayal of an Indian political leader can be found in M. S. S. Pandian's work on the cinema actor and former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. G. Ramachandran. Pandian meticulously reconstructs the socio-economic and cultural processes that went into the conflation of MGR's on-screen persona as a sub-altern 'hero' representing the everyday downtrodden Tamil masses with his real-life political persona.

11 Modi: Mastery of the visual, the mediated, the populist

In the PM's Hindutva populism, the 'elite' are the Congress party, mired in corruption scandals, and the English-language national media. The old post-independence elite in India are often contrasted with the 'neo-middle class', the beneficiary of India's economic liberalization in the 1990s, by the PM and the Bharatiya Janata Party. The PM attempts to interpellate two broad,

overlapping categories of 'people' fighting against the Westernized, secular/'pseudo-secular' elites – 'Hindus' and the developmentalist 'neo-middle class' (Jaffrelot, 2013a). On one hand he appeals as a harbinger of economic growth, and on the other he appeals to a Hindu base through his banalized Hindutva (Chakraborty et al., 2018).

11a The Makeover

From the inception of his social media presence in 2011, the PM's social media accounts have disseminated images of himself that have portrayed him as an accessible and tech-savvy leader interacting directly to ordinary citizens. He had had official accounts of himself in Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram and other major social media platforms since before the 2014 elections (Pal et al., 2016). The 'brand' Modi created through social media platforms has had much to do with the morphing of his image into an attractive one in the popular imagination. Earlier images of the PM presented him as an austere pracharak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and a strident Hindu nationalist. This image served him well in the Gujarat state elections of the first decade of this century (there were other factors at play as well (Jaffrelot, 2013b). But as he gained prominence in the national political stage, his image changed from the 'pracharak' to 'Vikas Purush'. His sartorial choices changed, as did his accessories, as laptops and smart-phones became constants in his pictures. This was built on claims of impressive economic growth numbers for Gujarat's economy (which had always boasted high growth rates), targeted welfare schemes and claims of able governance. The transformed image also sought to dispel any misgivings regarding the rather unsavoury episodes of the PM's past, especially the Gujarat riots of 2002 (Jaffrelot, 2016). A statement expressing contrition from Modi as the Chief Minister on the massacre of Muslims was not forthcoming, and the media, especially the national English print and electronic media, did not share a positive impression of him. He was banned from travelling to the US and lawmakers in the Global North passed resolutions against him. The PR firms and the PM's campaign for the 2014 elections put a massive operation in place to counter these impressions, and social media platforms were integral to this task. Through these platforms the PM reached not only to the traditional bloc of support for Hindu nationalism and the BJP but also wooed other voters through a rhetoric of economic growth, development, good governance, rooting out corruption, a better standing in world affairs and so on (Jaffrelot, 2015a).

The PM has been on Twitter since 2009, but a spurt in activity in his official Twitter account became apparent from 2012 onwards, perhaps an early signal of his candidature for Prime Minister-ship from the Bharatiya Janata Party. At present, Barack Obama is the only politician to have more followers than the PM on Twitter. As the campaign for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections ramped up the PM's Twitter handle was taken several steps to expand and enhance its network. Several Twitter accounts changed their display picture to that of the PM, and retweeted all of his tweets. He met with several prominent celebrities – popular cinematic artists, other popular politicians and notable personalities and these meetings were photographed and shared by his social media accounts. Such images were re-tweeted heavily by the PM's follower base, but also by the fan-base of the celebrities with whom he was photographed. These fan-bases also started following him and his follower networks burgeoned exponentially. This was an especially effective strategy for reaching out to voters in Southern India, where the PM had little pull at the time. His photographs meeting mega-stars from the region such as Rajnikant and Vijay from Tamil Nadu, Pawan Kalyan and Nagarjuna from Andhra Pradesh earned him quite a lot of online followers from the region (Pal et al., 2016).

Such image-work, thus, had a significant impact in the transformation of the PM's image and in helping him ingratiate himself to the public. This feel-good image also helped detach from any associations with the 2002 Gujarat riots (Pal, 2015). His 'selfies' were seen as having a down-to-earth and amateur touch of the technologically curious everyman who was 'authentic'. This helped endear him to large sections of the Indian voters, as well as being a low-cost method of 'viral' dissemination of one's images (Baishya, 2015).

11b A soft tweeting touch

Studies of the PM's tweets show a marked change in terms of tone and rhetorical content and styling after 2012 designed to reach out to a wider audience with an eye to the national electoral stage. In the early days, his tweets carried a marked Hindu nationalist standpoint (although even back then they displayed belligerence or any overt exclusionary intent). The usual Hindutva call-to-arms of re-discovering India's lost glory (which in the Hindutva historicization is the result of not just of British rule but also the coming of the 'Islamic' rulers, referring to the Turkic and Mughal rule in medieval times) was also reflected in his tweets. A lot of his tweets in the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections carried an emphasis on 'development' and plans for the same. A

'feel-good' message that with him at the helm India would rapidly be back on track on the path of development was created. Technological acumen was key to such messaging, and often dove-tailed India's aspirational youth and middle-classes which considered technological accessories as markers of progress, development and upward mobility. The youth demographic, more likely to be on social media platforms, was especially a key target for Modi's PR campaign (Pal et al., 2018). In his speeches and in his social media content the PM often used pithy acronyms and language approximating to the technocratic, creating the image of a man well-versed in contemporary forms of managerial governance. The PM also presents an acceptable mode of social mobility to the country's affluent and middle-classes as well as upper-castes; he does not fit the mould of the assertive sub-altern political leader that antagonizes these demographics but rather serves as a repository for aspirations, given his rise in politics coming from a humble background (the 'tea-seller' slur used by his opponents has been turned around into an image of success through hard-work). He presents an easy critique of class and caste hierarchies through mobility without challenging these structural hierarchies (Pal et al., 2017).

The sub-continent's ancient history and accomplishments in terms of philosophy, theology, technology, culture etc., a frequent bugbear of Hindtuva, also slides metonymically into accomplishments of Hinduism, and these find frequent mention in the PM's tweets. Such tweets often exhort the country to reinstate India's place as a super-power and a 'Vishwa Guru' in the world stage. These often accompanied Modi's visits to prominent religious functionaries, godmen, sages etc. and that unlocking India's ancient wisdom would allow the nation to provide leadership to the nation (Pal et al., 2017). His tweets have always insisted on a distinction between the sub-continent and the West, and a claim to indigeneity in thought, action and technique is often seen. Those that the Sangh Parivar considers its political and intellectual precursors such as Swami Vivekananda and Vallabhbhai Patel have always found special mention in his tweets on their birth and death anniversaries (Pal et al., 2018).

The PM's social media presence also displays a form of 'banal religiosity', such as greetings on religious occasions and quotidian practices and platitudes that are designed to resonate with the everyday lives of the intended audience (Pal, et al., 2017). These are largely on Hindu occasions, but Sikh and Buddhist festivals are also frequently mentioned, and are discursively placed under the same broad umbrella as Hinduism. Greetings were also issued on Islamic and Christian

festivals, especially if they had a connection with the sub-continent such as the anniversary of a Sufi saint. It bears emphasizing that Modi's tweets emphasize inclusive national unity (the 'we') but there is no overt mention of an 'other'; the 'other' is tactically made apparent through omission. While his public speeches may often turn fiery, Modi's social media presence avoids antagonistic and divisive Hindutva standpoints and usually disseminates inclusive, patriotic messages, drawing from a rhetoric and symbology that one would associate with what Michael Billig calls 'banal nationalism' rather than strong nationalism. The messages were tailored to be ambiguous so as not to alienate the moderate voters and those of a more liberal bent of mind. However, there are enough subtle hints and dog-whistles in his social media posts for his most stridently Hindu nationalist followers (Pal et al., 2018).

Modi's tweets show a preference for allusive, alliterative, sarcastic and ironic wordplay when referring to his political opponents. This helps him display his wit and endear himself to various publics. Witty and sarcastic remarks peppered with easily graspable pop cultural references make for Modi's choicest, most biting volleys aimed at his political opponents. These statements usually operate in the form of a wink and a nod towards his followers, as though they are in on the joke. Irony let him express sentiments without resorting to literal language that would have been too aggressive or did not fit decorum while allowing him to mount sharp criticisms of his opponents. Followers feel as though they are in on the joke, and this strengthens ties of affiliation (Pal et al., 2018). Unlike Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Rodrigo Duterte and other contemporary populists Modi's Twitter presence is not polarizing; there are hardly ever any controversial tweets, nor are there attacks on mainstream media (Gonawela et al., 2018) (Schroeder, 2019).

But his Twitter network has significant number of hardcore Hindu nationalist followers and amplifiers, and there is a subtle signaling to ardent Hindutva followers as mentioned above. Modi's Twitter presence also has a singular politics of 'follow-backs'; Modi follows back a select few of his followers (Schroeder, 2018). Such 'follow-backs' lead to exultations of joy and gratitude; such followers usually claim to be 'blessed' to be followed by the Prime Minister. There have been several instances of such followers of launching vulgar attacks (misogynist attacks in the case of women, including rape threats) and massive trolling campaigns against critiques of Modi and Hindutva (Pal et al., 2018).

The techno-culture of contemporary populism follows a certain political contradictory logic that Margaret Cannovan had detected two decades ago; the affordances of modern network enabled devices are used to challenge the hierarchies with the 'elites' at the top, but through the figure of an autocratic/authoritarian political actor. These practices of retweets and follow-backs help in the establishment of 'affective linkages' through the haptic surfaces of ICT devices, innervating the political affiliations between the leader and the follower (Govil and Baishya, 2018). This fulfils a 'fantasy of unmediated contact' between the leader and the follower, as William Mazzarella puts it; a fantasy of disintermediation through ICTs between the political leader and subjects has been part of the popular imagination and precedes the rise of Modi. The ideological premise that such technologies (especially internet-enabled ones) help increase transparency and accountability in processes of governance has been an integral part of neo-liberal techno-governmentality. Such processes have found encouragement since the times of Rajiv Gandhi, who was often photographed with computers and regularly used them in his meetings (he was given the sobriquet 'Computerji' by his ministers and bureaucrats due to his fondness for his laptop). Later, Chief Ministers in the Southern states sought to cultivate a similar image of the 'laptop politician', chief among them being Andhra Pradesh's Chandrababu Naidu who sought to use corporate management techniques in the running of the state. Such an orientation is often profoundly anti-political, as in such a set-up politics is seen as a road-block to the smooth functioning of the governance machine. Opaque processes inaccessible to the common citizen made murkier by red-tapism are considered a vestige of the state-centred development and governance process of old, to be blown away by the fresh air of neo-liberal techno-managerial expertise. Especially through social media platforms an 'appearance of direct accountability and representation' is created. The demagogic figure that is to rid the hierarchies dominated by the elite is now seemingly available at the finger-tips of followers, as is the leader's corporeal image[101] (Mazzarella, 2006).

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[101] Mazzarella, however, pushes back against such fantasies of disintermediation and points out that the striving for a 'reality' shorn of all forms of mediation is in the order of a fantasy

Fig. 2: A follower of Modi on Twitter

Source: Twitter

11c Virtual intimacy

Long before the campaign for the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, Modi had understood and implemented the power of both visuality and ICTs in attracting voters. He had had extensive SMS and MMS campaigns during the state elections of Gujarat, and his voice messages were heard on mobile devices in the far reaches of the state (Jaffrelot, 2013a). Mayawati and the BSP ran a similarly successful SMS campaign in the UP state elections of 2007[102]. Modi's visage was inescapable in the urban visual field of Gujarat; his cardboard cut-outs dotted the urban space from airports to zoos. For the 2007 elections he had a TV channel launched to accompany the campaign, NaMo TV, pushing his image to house-holds. The visual *piece de resistance* of these campaigns were the 3D holograms of Modi used to address the public in certain meetings (Jaffrelot, 2016). This novel spectacle attracted fairly large crowds and speculation was rife as to whether Modi was physically present or not at these venues. Playing by the populist handbook, Modi and his campaign understood very well the need to provide the electorate the feeling of a modicum of

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[102] See Jeffrey, R. and Doron, A., 2013. *Great Indian Phone Book*. C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd.

physical co-presence with their leader without the mediation of anyone else (Govil and Baishya, 2018). All of this was happening under the aegis of the powerful PR team that had been cobbled together - veteran advertising professionals such as Prasoon Joshi, NRIs in senior corporate positions in firms such as McKinsey etc. Already in 2007 Modi had enlisted the services of the firm APCO that had a track record of making palatable the image of authoritarian leaders and dictators such as Sani Abacha of Nigeria and Kazakhstan's President-for life Nursultan Nazarbayev (Jaffrelot, 2016).

Fig. 3: Modi addressing crowds through a 3D-hologram

Source: Google

To further reinforce the visual messaging, Modi was quite particular about his wardrobe choices when appearing in public or delivering. He was never seen wearing anything in the colour black and green (which had Islamic connotations) nor was he ever seen unfolding the palms of his right-hand (the symbol of the Congress party). Saffron was the hue most often in his clothing (Jaffrelot, 2016). The particular sleeveless kurta he wore came to be known as the Modi *kurta*, and such was its popularity that up-scale apparel stores started retailing it. (Modi had stated that he had ripped off the sleeves of his *kurta* because as a *pracharak* of very limited means he did not have much choice of clothes, and the sleeveless kurta helped him work. It fed into the legend of Modi as a 'self-made' man who had achieved the heights of his political career through hard work) (Govil

and Baishya, 2018). Modi's corporeal being has ever served as a billboard for Brand Modi, whether it be the claims of the valiant 56-inch chest or the headgear he donned when he addressed audiences in different parts of the country. Modi endeared himself to citizens by putting on the headdress specific to the regions and communities he visited (Jaffrelot, 2016).

11d Political branding

Looking at Modi through the discursive lens of masculinity presents an interesting case vis-a-vis the prior discussion on the cultural register of high-low and 'bad behaviour'. While effusively masculine and witty, Modi has never resorted to vulgarity or speaking in crass terms referring to virility as some of the other leaders of the Global South discussed above.

The circulation of Modi's physiognomy happened through other means such as t-shirts and masks as well. It was as though his followers, by wearing masks with his face on it, were imbibing the leader in their bodies and letting him speak through them, albeit in a visual, non-discursive tongue (Jaffrelot, 2015a). Scholars have commented that a peculiar 'semiotic reversal' was at play; instead of the leader representing the people, it is the people who were representing the leader, forming a collectivity with the symbolic artifacts on their bodies.

Fig. 4: Modi mask

The corporeal Brand Modi was always found to be operating at maximum potential during his public speeches and the select few media interviews he deigned fit to give. Sarcasm and witticisms were not reserved for his tweets alone; he delivered his speeches with vigour and aplomb, with stinging jibes at opponents and wordplay. He exuded the bodily expressions of a charismatic and engaging speaker in his rousing speeches, often involving a call-and-response engagement with the audience (Jaffrelot, 2015a). He does tend on occasion to be slightly bellicose in his public speeches, and has been known to make sectarian Hindu nationalist statements that involve othering minorities (his 'kabristan' remark in speech given in UP during the campaign for the 2017 elections is a case in point). Although BJP often claimed to have moved past appeals to caste as a tactic their track record proves otherwise; Modi, an OBC candidate, often made appeals based on caste in areas with strong OBC political currents such as Bihar. Tinkering with caste to build coalitions against dominant OBC and SC communities is a strategy that the BJP has used fruitfully even in 2019, especially against the SP and the BSP in Uttar Pradesh (Jaffrelot, 2015b).

Brand Modi has also proven itself adroit in 'handling' the media, especially given the negative coverage received by him after Godhra. On several occasions the PM has had adversarial interviews with journalists, especially those from the English-language media in the first decade of the new millennium. But from 2007 onwards the PM refused to speak about Godhra anymore, claiming that he had already said all that he had to say on the matter. Britta Ohm argues that through his silence on this issue in the media Modi deployed another populist tactic; he let the 'people' come to their own conclusions regarding the 'truth'. The more journalists tried to question Modi the more it seemed there was a hidden 'agenda' against him concocted by the powers-that-be i.e. the elites. It helped to create this aura of a martyr around him. Modi has since then been known to give interviews only to those journalists who are sympathetic to him. There has never been any overt interference by the Modi government in the media. But several senior journalists have left their positions in media channels under a cloud of suspicion that their position vis-a-vis the regime had something to do with their departure eg. Punya Prasoon Bajpai (Ohm, 2015). Not that the media conducted itself in accordance to its professed principles. Statistical analysis of the period running up to the election of 2014 shows that most TV channels focussed solely on Modi rather than interrogate factually the different claims to development. Issues of inequality,

polarisation and structural discrimination remained neglected. This further fed into the personalization of politics (Mudgal, 2015). Modi has stopped giving press conferences altogether and his statements are available only through his speeches, radio program (Mann ki Baat), social media posts and the occasional interview with allegedly sympathetic journalists.

Modi's advent had changed the BJP-RSS power equation as well, and his relationship with the old guard of the BJP and the RSS was far from placid. During his stint as Chief Minister he had problems with the RSS because of his tendency to centralize all decision-making powers in his own hands. He is widely understood to have stolen the thunder from L. K. Advani, the person who led the Rath Yatra in the 1990s that provided a boost to Hindutva (and led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid), and became the face of Hindu nationalism as well as the Prime Ministerial candidate (Jaffrelot, 2016).

12 Arvind Kejriwal: The extraordinary 'ordinary'

Both Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) burst into the Indian political scene through the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement of 2010 and attempted to stand out through a performance of 'newness', in ideological and aesthetic terms. They projected their initiative as being qualitatively different from the other parties, and the 'outsider' (to the Indian political party system) image has helped them a lot. They also put a lot of emphasis on the extraordinary capabilities of 'ordinary' citizens, as their name suggests. The 'aam aadmi' becomes a heroic figure, fighting entrenched corruption and an unwieldy bureaucracy, and the AAP worker is usually shown solving such problems for fellow citizens. Rather than addressing structural issues of caste, class or gender, the citizen became the rallying point for AAP. Such issues were conflated with the usual functioning of politics, mired in nepotism, rent-seeking behaviour, lackadaisical attitude towards public welfare etc. (Roy, 2014) Scholars noted that the rise of AAP took place in an ecology of privatized media and an ideological climate of neo-liberalism. Thus, the media narrative of corruption being a governmental problem, and the solution to the problem being a move away from state-led initiatives to privatization, meshed well with AAP's message. Governance emerged as a buzzword that displaced 'politics', which was anyway maligned as 'dirty' and 'inefficient', and the delivery of services took precedence over contestation. This gestalt especially appealed to the middle-classes, and an orientation that challenged state malpractices by pro-active, engaged private citizens was encouraged. The media, thus, played a

huge role in the ascent and dissemination of AAP's image. Social media also helped AAP a lot, as volunteers on social media platforms across the world worked on their behalf, swelling their ranks that were composed from the anti-corruption and RTI campaigns of the previous decades (Udupa, 2014).

The solution to that was presented was in the form of well-educated citizens who took over the reins of governance from the political class. AAP being limited mostly to Delhi, had to contend with urban slum-dweller voters, and they were seen with the twin lens of pity and suspicion. Such voters were considered the usual targets of political parties that promote patron-client relations, while they were also seen as being victims of the corrupt system (Roy, 2014). The reforms proposed by them such as legislative recall caused raised eye-brows, and some of their ideals and processes have been called populist. A big concern is how AAP engenders a sort of 'anti-politics' through a neglect of structural issues and focussing only on governance and service delivery (Palshikar, 2013).

Arvind Kejriwal earned the sobriquet 'Mufflerman' for his choice of apparel. In his early days he always had a muffler tied around his head to protect himself from Delhi's harsh winter. This gave rise to much online humour, both in favour and against him. He was in general dressed as a middle-class salaryman. The choice of clothing for Kejriwal is the opposite of traditional Indian political leaders who present themselves wearing white khadi. This is seen in both AAP leaders and workers (Roy, 2014).

Conclusion: 'Follow the leader', a claim in sovereignty

One way of understanding the relationship between the political leader and the follower in the sub-continent is through the relationship of *bhakti* (devotion) with all the religious-theological-spiritual connotations associated with it. In this framework of understanding, the figure of the populist leader, central to the discussion here, presents itself with all the corporeal, gestural, accessorial, behavioural and other performative aspects as offering *darshana* to the follower (Jain 2003:53, 2007:102). This framework, developed in the conceptualisation of the aesthetico-religious relationship between devotees and the image of deities, however, needs to give us a complete picture of the concrete political processes at play between political leaders and citizens in the country, argues Madhava Prasad. Such an approach also runs the risk of being

Orientalist/Indological in nature, seeking cultural continuity from the past at the risk of neglecting issues of popular sovereignty and how they play out in the modern Indian electoral democratic polity. The approach also reproduces the apprehensions and fears of the colonial-era rulers and subsequent nationalist elites about the cultural and political preferences of the subaltern classes. Madhava Prasad develops his argument regarding the cinema mega-stars turned politicians of Southern India, but Partha Chatterjee hazards an extension of his conceptualisation to the whole polity with its competitive populism (Chatterjee 2020).
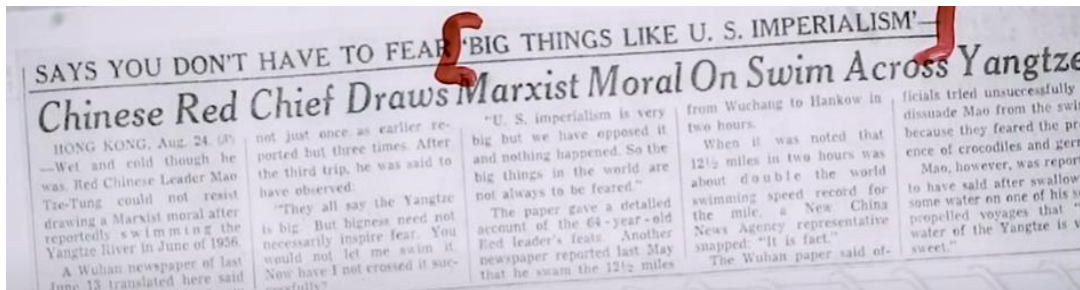
The words *bhakti* and *bhakta* may connote different subject positions, depending upon the context, in the sub-continent. It can also be used in the context of the appreciation and taste of socio-cultural performances and the performative displays of political leaders. Such political performances are also related to the participation of what Partha Chatterjee called the 'political society'. After the disappearance of the traditional bearers of sovereignty, the monarchs and royalty (during colonial rule and then after India's independence and the abolition of the princely states), the object towards which the constituents of political society could direct their enthusiasm for the exercise of sovereignty was indeterminate. The immediate post-colonial political scenario was such that the social and caste elites took paternalistic charge of the voting currents of the socio-economic subaltern groups. At the helm stood the nationalist elite who held the reigns of power in the central government. For subaltern populations, voting was the sole mode of participation in 'sovereign power'. Thus, when the mega-star screen actors emerged, first in the cultural scene and then transitioned to politics, the subaltern groups found an avenue for popular participation. The former realm's enthusiasm and passion bled over to the latter (Prasad 2009).

Prasad categorically states this is in no way a replication of the bhakti shown to deities or the supplication before monarchs. It is not as though people could not comprehend that the mythological or historical role played by the actor-turned-leader on screen was not the deity in-itself. Nor did they identify with such on-screen characters merely at the register of the imaginary. Instead, the political leader created a 'virtual socio-political order', or a community of 'enthusiasm' around himself or herself. At the epitome of this formation was of course, the leader himself or herself, with the mandate to exercise powers of sovereignty. And through their exaggerated displays of fandom, the followers could be part of this exercise of sovereignty. This did not upset all existing hierarchies; this is a political model where, at least in the imaginary,

benevolent social superiors cede power voluntarily to the people, and act on their behalf for their benefit. But the followers could participate in the usurpation of sovereign power from the national elites and their regional counterparts and foist it in the hands of these regional populist politicians. Chatterjee supplements Prasad's argument by positing that in no way is this a Hobbesian sovereign that takes dominion over all subjects The necessity of an 'enemy' in populism dictates there be internal enemies in addition to external ones; thus, social cleavages and conflict are inevitable (Chatterjee 2020).

CHAPTER II

IMAGE POLITICS I: HISTORICAL CONTINUITY ON A DIGITAL PLATFORM

SAYS YOU DON'T HAVE TO FEAR 'BIG THINGS LIKE U. S. IMPERIALISM'—

Chinese Red Chief Draws Marxist Moral On Swim Across Yangtze

HONG KONG, Aug. 24. (P) —Wet and cold though he was, Red Chinese Leader Mao Tze-Tung could not resist drawing a Marxist moral after reportedly swimming the Yangtze River in June of 1956.

A Wuhan newspaper of last June 13 translated here said not just once as earlier reported but three times. After the third trip, he was said to have observed:

"They all say the Yangtze is big. But bigness need not necessarily inspire fear. You would not let me swim it. Now have I not crossed it successfully?"

"U. S. imperialism is very big but we have opposed it and nothing happened. So the big things in the world are not always to be feared."

The paper gave a detailed account of the 64-year-old Red leader's feats. Another newspaper reported last May that he swam the 12½ miles from Wuchang to Hankow in two hours.

When it was noted that 12½ miles in two hours was about double the world swimming speed record for the mile, a New China News Agency representative snapped: "It is fact."

The Wuhan paper said of- ficials tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Mao from the swim because they feared the presence of crocodiles and germs.

Mao, however, was reported to have said after swallowing some water on one of his self-propelled voyages that "the water of the Yangtze is sweet."

'…….I felt close to this great leader who had always been a little mysterious to me. I understood swimming. I knew what it was like to feel tired after being in the water for a long time. I was twelve years old and very strong, but I doubted that I could swim for as long as Chairman Mao had. At last I knew that Chairman Mao was made of human flesh and blood, and at the same time I was moved with an even greater respect. I resolved once again to serve him with all my heart.'

- Liang Heng, in 'Son of the Revolution'

The images and the words above refer to two famous swimming events by Mao Zedong in 1956 and 1966. In the first case, in 1956, he swam across the Yangtze River in 3 phases, an arduous physical task. Mao wished to put on a show of vigour and strength against antagonists such as 'American imperialism'; the morale he wished to transmit was that even great obstacles could be overcome. Even more significant, however, was his swim in the same river ten years later. Although he only took a dip in 1966, it had its intended effect as a form of political communication meant for his followers as well as his rivals. This feat of physical activity helped dispel rumours of his ailing health and helped him remain at the helm of the reigning Communist Party. Further, it helped Mao use his corporeal form to transmit connotations of symbolic strength and physical prowess, meant to weather 'great waves' of challenges. In his physical body, Mao sought to symbolise the 'proletarian revolution' that he had led, and swimming soon became a massively popular sporting activity and hobby in China. To develop a 'healthy body', resolute and resilient for the Revolution, was a message the Chinese masses readily took to heart. It was imperative for his official photographer to capture these moments in the water, such as him waving at (supposedly) adoring crowds assembled for the event. These images and paintings made of the event found extensive use in propaganda during the Cultural Revolution[103] (Poon, 2019). Such narratives surrounding the leader also plugged into a cultural background cache of the feats of the physical prowess of individuals from myth, legend and history.

This example is germane to the project at hand. It establishes once again the necessity of a close understanding of the image-work that goes into a politician's body and the ways in which its performance is deployed. In doing this, it is also essential to establish the historical, cultural and mythological archives particular to a region from which such performances draw. This chapter is devoted to the above goals. It shall present the pictorial data collected from the official social media handles of the Prime Minister, Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal's official Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages, and establish the body politic and bodily politics entangled with them. In the previous chapter, we have already laid out the scholarship regarding how these modes of performative

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[103] The propaganda writers retroactively built a legend surrounding Mao the adept swimmer, who used to swim great laps in the ponds and lakes around his home during his childhood.

communication are crucial to understanding contemporary populism, especially with regard to 'style' in a media-saturated political 'milieu'. We have also established how this populism has also increasingly become a 'digital' populism, finding ever new avenues to establish ways of (seemingly) unmediated contact with followers of populist leaders and voters through social media platforms. Images are crucial to this, as they bypass the need for textual, educational mediation.

The chapter has seven broad thematic sections. The first deals with resonances of the 'styles' of historically consequential political leaders such as Gandhi in the image-work of the three politicians under study. There is also a section on how alternative, more martial acetic modes of corporeal fashioning can be seen in these images. Masculinity and muscularity are recurrent themes in quite a few sections. We also investigate in depth the imagery of religiosity we find in the data collected.

1 South Asia: political culture, political idiom, political aesthetics

The South Asian region has a rich trove of meanings attached to 'politics' and the 'political' that have flourished in conjunction with the indigenous culture of the region. For instance, 'politics' is considered to be a 'dirty' process that causes disharmony and distress, and is diametrically opposite to 'development' and 'democracy'. Jonathan Spencer explores such locally-sourced meanings attached to 'politics' through his works. He points towards an agonistic contest in these societies that is neither caused nor is caused by 'politics' but is rather co-constituted by it. Here, too, one finds politics being driven by narratives of a virtuous 'us' against a vice-laden them, in a manner that reflects Chantal Mouffe's vision of contentious politics driven by a foundational antagonism that belies attempts to showcase a united and harmonious society (rather than a politics driven solely by rational deliberation or patronage and material self-interests). Spencer also questions lines of thought that emerges from 'the 'resistance studies' school of political anthropology that gives short shrift to processes such as elections as entities to be studied for their own sake (rather than being epiphenomenal). Spencer found that such processes take on an idiomatic life on their own in South Asian cultures, as they are translated into

the local parlance[104]. Such a political anthropological approach would yield rich dividends for this research.

Politics in India is carried out in many different idioms, as W. H. Morris-Jones had noted long ago, that sometimes intermingle and sometimes confront each other. Morris-Jones speaks of the 'language', 'idiom', 'manner', 'styles' and 'fashions' of Indian politics, which can be broadly categorised into the 'traditional', the 'modern' and the 'saintly'. As democracy deepens and the stress and strain of electoral politics pervades Indian society, the largely caste-based and ascriptive identity-based 'traditional' idiom makes rapid onslaughts on the 'modern' politics of policies, the Constitution and political parties. At the same time, the demands of 'modern' mass democracy destabilises 'traditional' politics. The 'saintly' idiom of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave is focused on ideals of dispassionate, disinterested public service. All these 'idioms' are integral to how 'politics' is carried out in India, and at the same time also provides an account of 'politics'[105]. It would be interesting to investigate the political 'idiom' that is evolving on social media platforms in India. Curiously, the 'saintly' idiom has been pilfered upon by far more radical political currents in projects of secular self-making but with an 'ascetic modality' shorn of all worldly material pleasures.

The contemporary political idioms of India are also often seen to draw from a political 'archive' of visual material that stretches back temporally. According to Christopher Pinney, the Indian political archive is 'continually spewing the past into the future' (Pinney, 2014). This political archive provides 'a resource of images, concepts, and actions that are dynamically folded back into protest spaces, media representations, and public culture' (Webb, 2015). The political deployment of images in such recent moments of political ferment such as the India Against Corruption movement bear testament to the popular visual culture of India and the politics playing out through it. Bricoleur-like attributes are not restricted to those online denizens with access to photo-editing softwares alone; such as an aesthetic practice is also seen in political articulation through visual

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[104] See Spencer, J. (2007) *Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*, Cambridge University Press
[105] See Morris-Jones, W.H. (1963) 'India's political idioms', in Philips, C.H. (ed.) *Politics and society in India*, London: G. Allen & Unwin

means in posters and other offline means. Visual material from the past constitute a ready to hand repertoire from which to draw not only visual components but also vitality (Pinney, 2014). The bricoleur-like creators draw from a variety of sources, such as 'past national events', 'performance traditions' as well as 'filmic and theatrical histories' (Pnina et al., 2014). Pinney notes how concepts and motifs drawn from Bollywood movies such 'Lage Raho Munnabhai' and 'Rang de Basanti' figured in the India Against Corruption movement, for instance (Pinney, 2014). In such visual practices animating politics, regimes embody the 'imaginaries of good and evil'. Political leaders are also constructed as autocratic, despotic or endowed with virtuous attributes through visual means. Erich Kantorowicz had spoken of the King's 'two bodies' – one symbolic and one physical. While official images of leaders often attempt to rhetorically construct a charismatic being that appears symbolically transcendental, popular practices may seek to corporalise such leaders, as happened in the case of Muammar Qadhafi[106]. Of course, both the drives, towards increased symbolization and corporalisation, might be an attempt to both detract from a leader's reputation or bolster it.

Politics and political struggle is, as Lina Khatib has noted, 'a process of images battling' and 'an inherently visually productive process', which is 'visual to a large degree', 'a struggle over presence, over visibility' (Khatib, 2013). These discussions on the potency of the visual in the political provide the avenues to bring into play the concept of political aesthetics. 'not all art is political, argues Crispin Sartwell, 'but all politics is aesthetic; at their heart political ideologies, systems and constitutions are aesthetic systems, multimedia artistic environments' (Sartwell, 2010). Aesthetic production in politics acts as an energising force. And popular visual political culture in the last decade has often been a product of 'travelling images' that spread across national borders through ICTs and other networks. These visual cultures are marked by their citationality, drawing their components and influences from across history and geographical boundaries. This 'widely shared invented language' of global political articulation, made possible to a considerable extent by ICTs and social media networks, finds appeal across class, ethnicity, race,

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[106] See Cherstich, I. (2014) 'The Body of the Colonel: Caricature and Incarnation in the Libyan Revolution', in Pnina, W. (ed.) *Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, Edinburgh University Press.

religion, gender and other social boundaries, leading to a form of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' that is yet grounded in local circumstances and socio-political flows, and is inflected by popular aesthetics of a region and local concerns of power differentials and issues of inequity and justice. It is this citational and inter-textual nature of this political aesthetic that makes it accessible to different demographics of people, especially through the internet, and leads it to being a form of bricolage or assemblage, drawing from localized images from the past or popular tropes (Pnina et al., 2014).

The visual representation of political leaders through t-shirts donned by supporters that are easily recognizable are not singular to Modi alone. Such a visual mode that adorns the bodies of followers of a populist leader has been seen in other spaces too. Orange t-shirts of the supporters of Kenyan populist leader Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement. Orange colour represents the fruit orange, the symbol for those who opposed greater power for the executive. Also an orange divided into equal parts represented equal resources for all eight provinces of Kenya (Resnick, 2010).

Raila Odinga t-shirts

Source: NYT

2 The Gandhian blueprint

Gandhi's schema has presented Indian political entrepreneurs one of the most successful and pragmatic means to acquire political support and mobilise huge masses of citizens to their cause. Upon close inspection one can detect similar strivings in Modi's image-work, although there are other strands of political image-making involved as well, in addition to the saintly idiom. Certain images of Modi make direct reference to retracing Gandhi's steps, by recreating pivotal moments of Gandhi's life. This might be done through images clicked in the same geographical location, or through artifacts that serve as *accoutrements* such as the *charkha* wheel used to spin *khadi* (heavy with political signification) (Gonsalves, 2010).
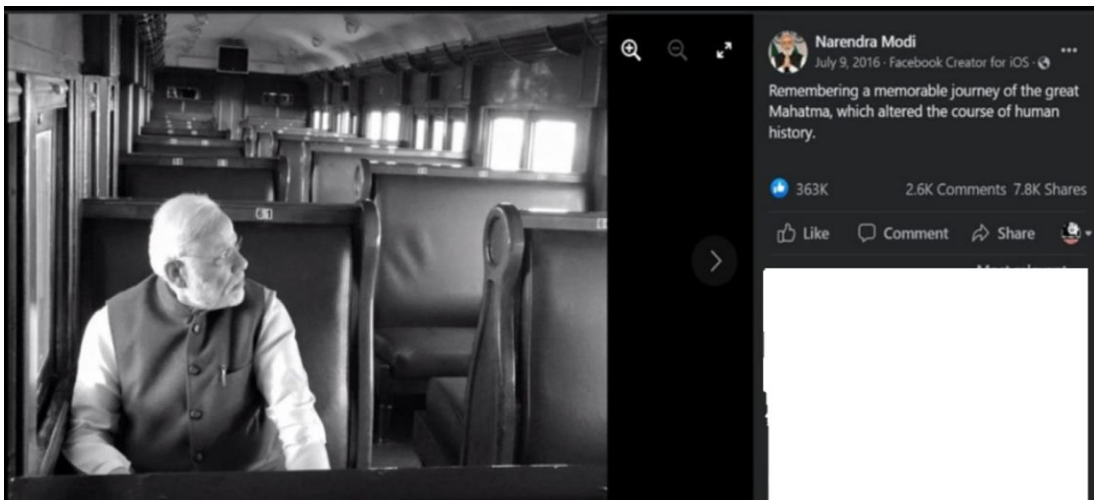
Fig. 1: PM retracing Gandhi's fateful Pietermaritzburg train ride

Fig. 1 features the PM riding in the same railway circuit in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, as Gandhi did, when he was thrown of the train coach for being non-white. We see a profile of the PM as the photographic subject seen in many other official images found in his official social media handles – we are presented with a profile of his face turned sideways, as he looks into the distance. Such visual profiles of political leaders are not uncommon; as Kress and van Leeuwen argue, such images 'offer' the viewer an opportunity to identify with the leader as they seem to gaze onto the horizon, the profile of a person with a vision. Such images also invite strong affective ties with the political leader (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020: 177–179). The viewer can also consume images

of the leader in times of spiritual introspection. Here we see image-work that is structured towards the creation of an icon, or the imbuing of iconicity into a new image, through referential linkage to the original iconic image[107]. They harken back to images that have been re-iterated to the point of banality, but still have the potential to evoke considerable emotional responses. These, along with other widely circulated images of the PM, approximate to iconic status by creating the picture of a leader hailing from humble roots, someone who can empathize with those less fortunate along with the aspirational. Iconicity is one the tools that help us understand the impact of these images. Iconicity often has an emotional force that draws from the many allusions and linkages such images have, beyond their mere denotative contents (Alexander, 2012). Being digital artifacts, the requirement for repetition is fulfilled easily by the massive number of copies transmitted, downloaded etc. (Hansen, 2015).

Gandhian idioms were also adopted in the India Against Corruption (IAC) effervescence from where Kejriwal had begun his political journey. As mentioned in the second chapter, here the Gandhian performances were infused with popular culture. It was also quite pronounced in the associational linkages that Kejriwal had with Anna Hazare.
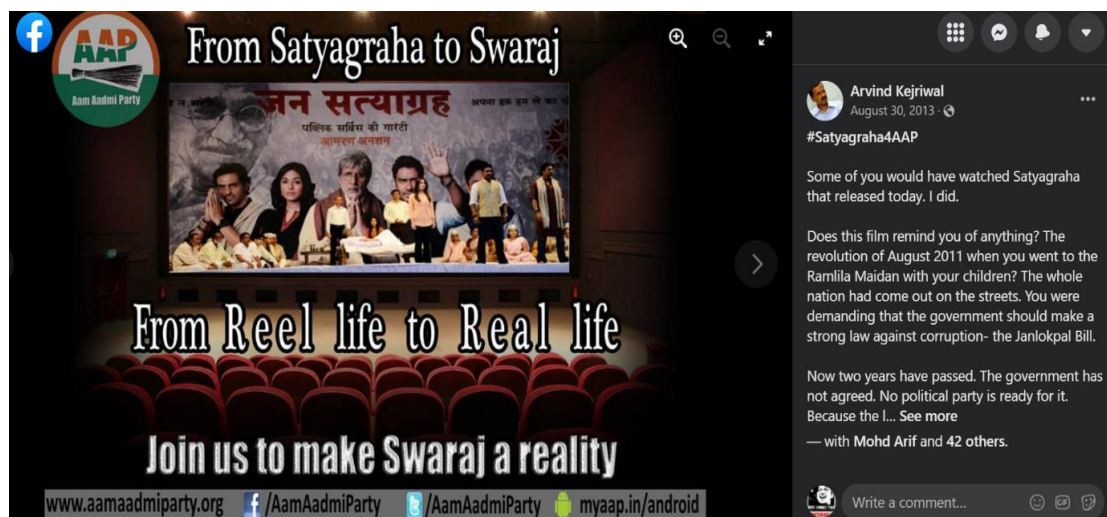

Fig. 2: AAP using images of the Bollywood movie 'Satyagraha' in its promotional images

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[107] The image of Gandhi on the floor of the train station having just been thrown out of the coach has often been re-created in various forms, including cinematic. Photographic image of Gandhi spinning the charkha, on the other hand, has iconic status on its own right

Fig. 3: Kejriwal seeks blessings of Anna Hazare by touching his feet

2a Channelling Gandhi through artifacts

Fig. 4, similarly, features Modi engaged in spinning *khadi* on a *charkha*. Objects such as the *charkha* have a strong referential linkage to Gandhi, serving an almost synecdochal role. Such referential linkages are also forms of 'banal' nationalism that would find wide acceptance among Indians (Billig, 1995). The spinning wheel in conjunction with the burning of clothes were a powerful visual signifier for Gandhi's political communication. For Gandhi, they served as metaphors performed to evoke the Hindu notions of purity and self-sacrifice through *yajna* (as well as economic *swaraj*) (Gonsalves, 2010).
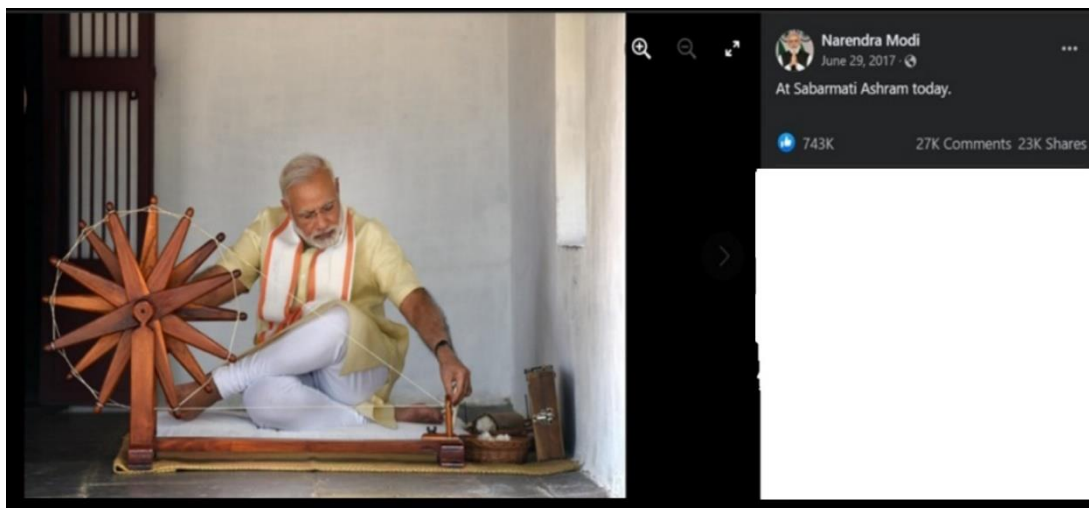

Fig. 4: PM Modi operating the *charkha*

2c Channelling Gandhi, the man of letters

However, Modi's emulation of Gandhian tactics in image-work is not confined to such banal nationalism alone, and the 'saintly idiom' of politics is evident elsewhere. There was a considerable consonance between the way in which Gandhi conducted his life and in his writings. They were often autobiographical in nature, concerned with the minutest details, actions and moral dilemmas in his life. These autobiographical writings were not merely his chronicles, but were also meant to serve as a guide to the youth on how to conduct their lives (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2009). Gandhi was quite insistent upon bringing upon a sea-change in the interiority of Indians through his words, written or otherwise. He saw such a change not just as a means to obtaining political freedom from the British, but as being an inalienable, spiritual component of the freedom struggle. Thus, Gandhi produced a voluminous body of written works – letters, editorials, missives etc. - in a simple and accessible form that would resonate with the life-worlds of the majority of Indians (Gonsalves, 2010). Gandhi's writings often had a confessional character, much like Rousseau and Augustine (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2009).
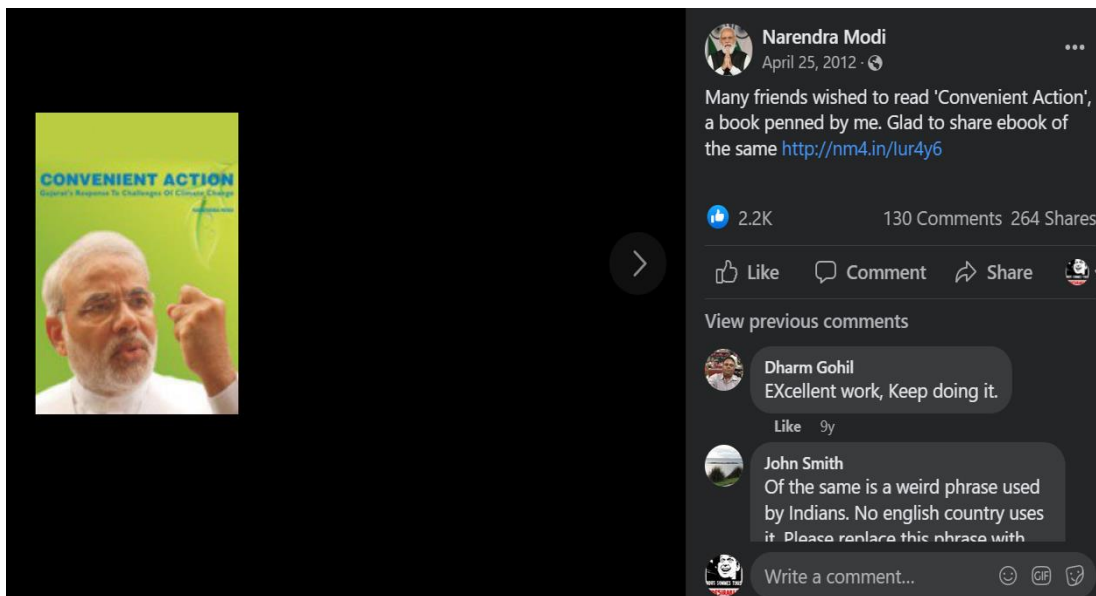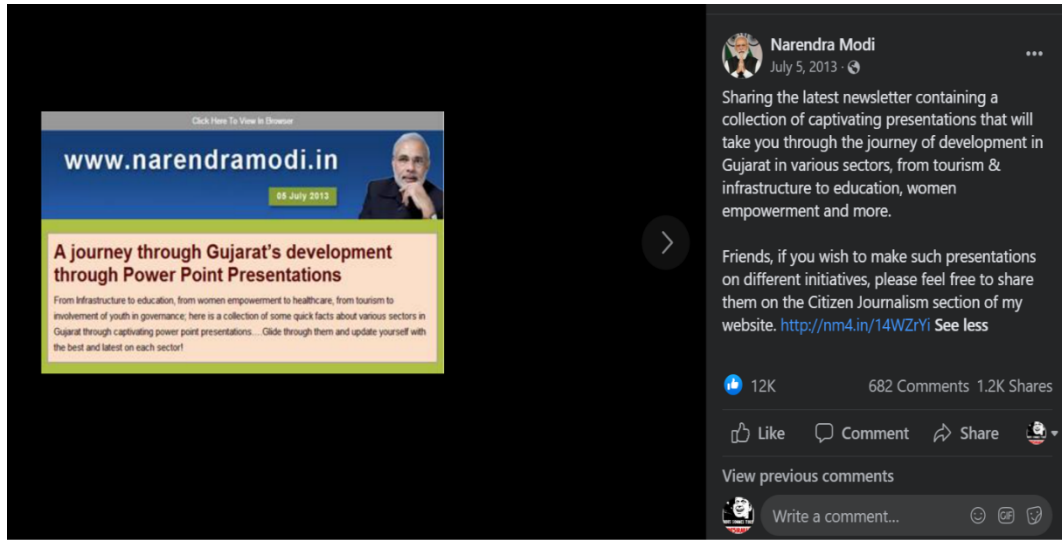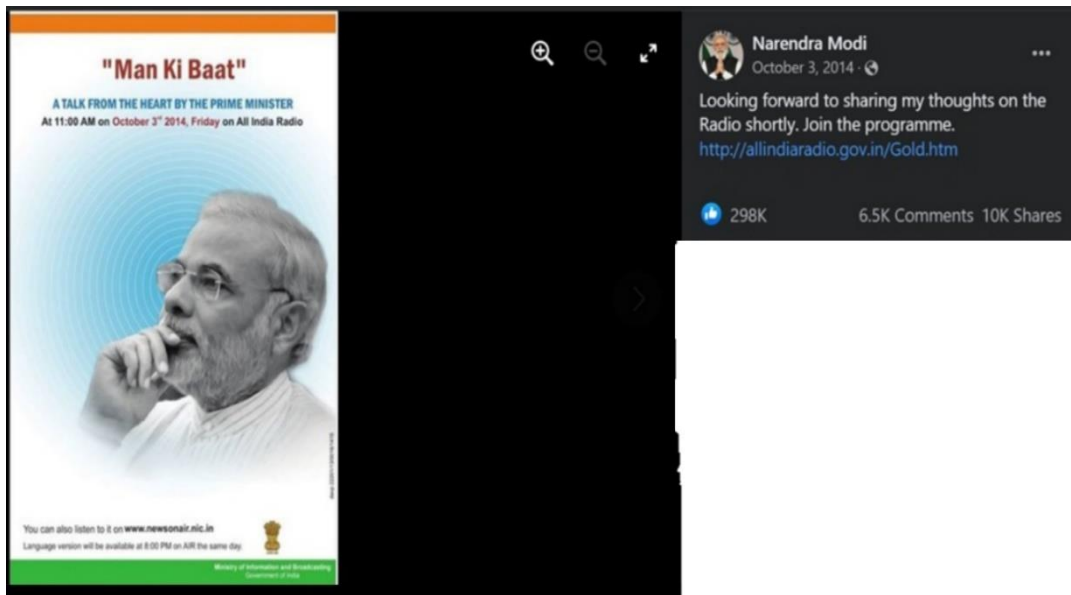

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

In a striking similarity to Gandhi, the PM has also sought to mobilise publics as a man of letters. In his early days on Facebook (2011-13) as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, the PM's visual posts had hyperlinks attached to them that led to his personal website. These links

were mostly to his newsletter, where he penned down his thoughts, or had transcripts or videos of speeches he had delivered. It also carried letters from the public putting their problems before him, hoping for better days and better governance. The PM's visual posts promoted a number of small books he had written, often stating that he had done so at the request of friends and admirers, where he put down his thoughts on various social, political and matters. In addition, autobiographical and biographical works around Modi's early life have also been propagated as material that could possibly serve as appropriate guidance for young Indians[108]. These texts have the same hagiographic character that M.S.S. Pandian had noticed in popular works regarding M.G. Ramachandran's life[109]. However, certain aspects of Gandhi's writing, such as accounts of his intense inner conflicts and self-doubt, are not found very often in Modi's works.

2d Witticisms

Gandhi lacked the usual markers of being a charismatic leader according to scholars. But he had his own brand of charm, brimming with wit and humour, that went beyond the sombre political thinker with a saintly halo. Gandhi, scholars posit, always drew upon his repertoire of pithy remarks (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2009). Modi, too, often had humorous barbs for his opponents, which he reproduced in the text captions accompanying images of him delivering speeches. They were sometimes alliterative (speaking of the 'disha' and 'dasha' of the country under Congress rule in one post, for instance). He often referred to the then UPA government as 'Delhi Sultanate'. Sometimes these remarks were in the form of acronyms, promoting Modi's vision of development and security. Due to their simplicity, they were also quite easy to remember.

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[108] https://www.india.com/loudspeaker/childhood-stories-bal-narendra-to-tell-childhood-of-narendra-modi-26665/
[109] https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/bal-narendra-deeply-dull

Fig. 8: 'Disha' and 'Dasha'

Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi, too, took pot-shots at the Modi government through their official handles. But their attacks lacked the personal stamp that Modi could put in his attacks.

The Congress party attempted to turn the BJP election campaign for the 2019 elections, 'Mai bhi chowkidar' (I am also a watchman) against themselves. In Fig. 9 we see Rahul Gandhi tweeting an image of Modi with the slogan emblazoned in the front as a hashtag. But in this case, Modi's smiling visage has a backdrop of the faces and torsos of some of India's most infamous loan-defaulters such as Nirav Modi. There are some industrialists and kin of BJP politicians as well, such as Gautam Adani and Jayant Shah. The effect is one of ridicule, as the connotation is of the wealth of the nation's exchequer being misappropriated by those who absconded without paying back massive loans from public-sector loans, or of nepotism through the BJP government.

Fig. 10 has Rahul Gandhi standing next to a look-alike of PM Modi, on the election campaign trail in 2018. This was a rather minor victory for the Opposition parties, as Abhinandan Pathak was an ardent supporter of the BJP and Modi before the 2014 elections. He had the capacity to garner attention during election rallies, as an attraction for prospective voters. He had, however, been disillusioned with the Modi government after 2014, and had switched over to the opposition. We get an inkling of the impact that the visage of an important leader has through individuals such as Pathak. In present times,

attendees of political rallies throng to click selfies along with such political lookalikes. They are a fixture in the festival-like atmosphere of election rallies.

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Fig. 11: Rahul Gandhi's tweet on the PM shooting videos for 'Man vs Wild' with Bear Grylls

The tweet in Fig. 10 by Rahul Gandhi refers to the bomb attack in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir in February, 2019. Incidentally, on the day PM Modi was shooting a special episode of the Discovery channel show 'Man vs. Wild' hosted by the celebrity survivalist Bear Grylls. The PM is hardly the first politician to transmit signals of masculine hardiness in the wilderness, ostensibly in a bid to promote India's wildlife. American President Theodor Roosevelt's hiking and big game hunting expeditions established him as a manly, sportsman-like figure to be emulated (Fehn, 2005). In recent times Russian President Vladimir Putin has also put out images of himself hunting bears, fishing and riding bare-chested in the wilderness.[110]

3 Beyond Gandhi: Exuding Power

Although there are frequent allusions to asceticism with respect to Modi, both by himself and by admirers such as Prasoon Joshi, he differs from others operating in the 'saintly idiom'. As seen in Fig. 12 and 13, Modi has on many occasions been seen to don the finest in terms of apparels, accessories and stationery, and this has been well-documented. They carry connotations of confident consumption that India's aspirational middle-classes consider to be desirable. Modi's image-work dovetails well with the neo-liberal order,

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[110] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRO-nDkWVdc

where India's 'difference' from the West is often marketed as an alluring appeal for global capital to operate in India (Kaur, 2020: 105). This is an image 'make-over' that has been at work in international neoliberal circuits for the last few decades, buoyed by the years of liberalization and high GDP growth that received glowing coverage on the international stage. Modi well embodies the desire to project of the quick-witted India, confident and rubbing shoulders with those from the Global North (ibid., 95). No longer is India to be associated with images of poverty, immiseration and populous chaos. The dominant narrative became one of an eternal nation whose essence was of Hindu spiritual richness and greatness, whose time to shine on the world stage had finally arrived after hundreds of years of Muslim and British rule (ibid., 91). This image of resurgent, ancient spiritual civilization works hand-in-hand with the aspirational consumption seen in Modi.
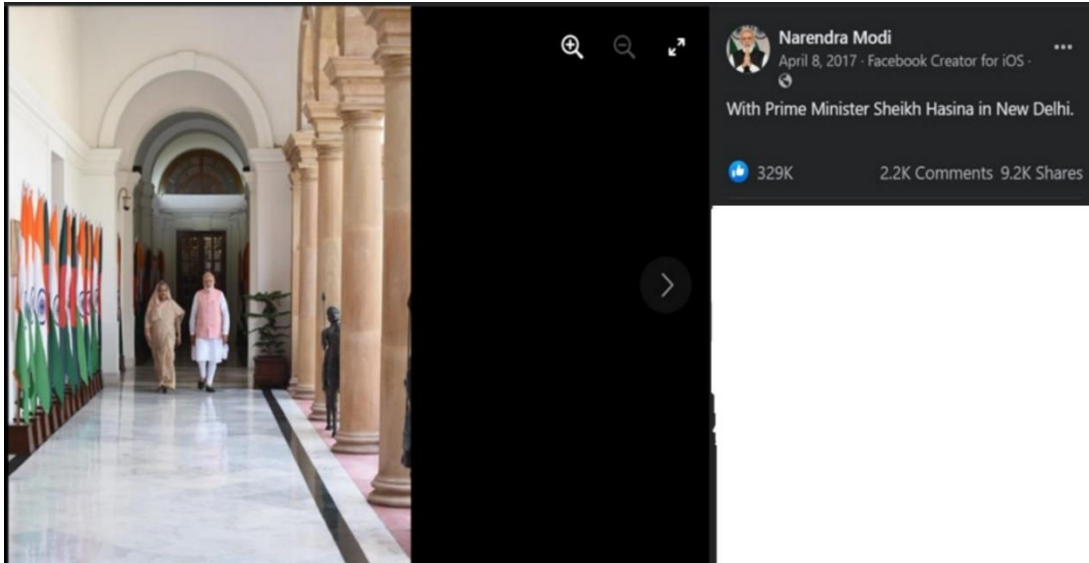

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

Images such as Fig. 14 and 15 invite the viewer to be part of candid moments of international power-brokering between political leaders. In these shots of Modi walking down the same long verandah with world leaders such as Donald Trump or with the leaders of important neighbouring states such as Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh. The *mise-en-scène* is reminiscent of the setting of TV shows such as *The West Wing* produced by Aaron Sorkin, where characters who occupied powerful positions in a fictional White House administration are often engaging in deep conversations while walking down corridors. The effect generated by such shots is that of officials who are so busy in important matters of governance and politics that they have to have conversations in corridors (Beavers, 2002). Then there are the images providing the citizen-viewer to standard images of the Prime Minister embracing important leaders with a smile, letting the viewer in on an intimate moment, which we'll see in the next chapter.

3a Saintly militancy

The sources for the saintly/ascetic mode of politics were not restricted to Gandhi, as Modi has a considerable number of visual posts with images of Swami Vivekananda and his quotes (especially in 2012-13, the year of Vivekananda's 150th birth anniversary). This allows Modi to channel an entirely different tradition of Indian masculine self-hood, that had its roots in the militant, restive Brahmin youth of late 19th century and early 20th

century Bengal and Maharashtra who despised the 'emasculation' of Indian upper-castes under British subjugation (Sanyal, 2014). These were in no small part inspired by Bankim Chandra's fictional works regarding bands of Hindu ascetic monks fighting the British or Muslim invaders. However, historical research argue that such martial monastic orders often had loyalties to sects and local monarchs, and more often than not had prosaic, political economic ends in mind rather defending a Hindu heartland. It has, however, provided a hallowed blueprint of the disciplined, acetic, well-built warrior monk defending faith and homeland (Pinch, 2011) (van der Meer, 1996).
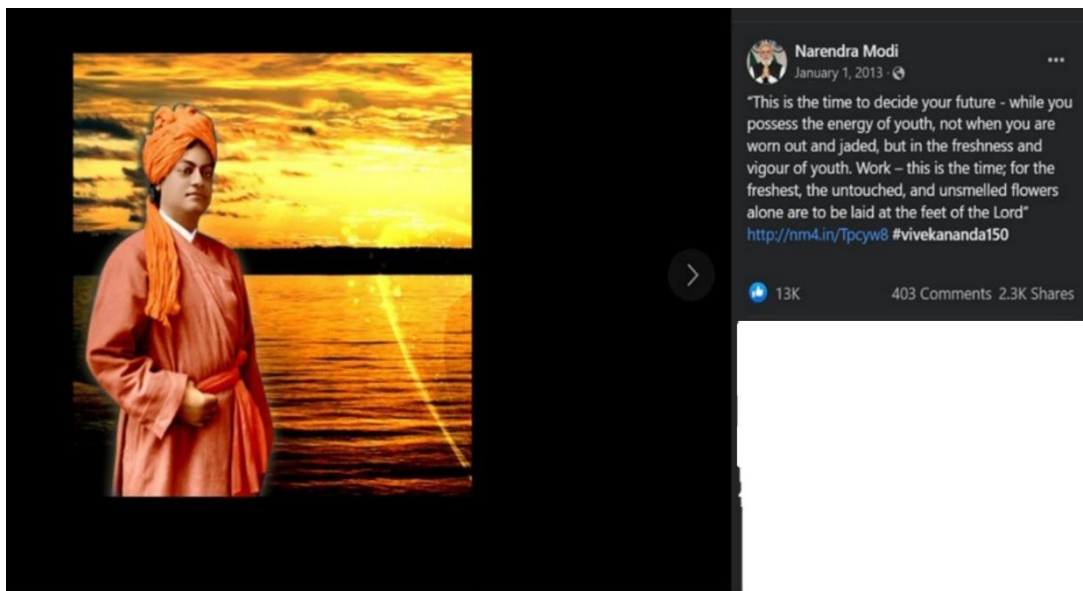

Fig. 16

During the electoral campaign for Gujarat legislative assembly in 2012 Modi had organized the month-long Vivekananda Yuva Vikas Yatra, travelling around Gujrat's constituencies in a *rath* (chariot)[111]. It was flagged off on the 150th anniversary of Vivekananda's famous speech on Indian spirituality and theology in Chicago. Yatras, too, have had a strong resonance in Indian polity as a form of political communication, since the times of Gandhi's *Dandi* march. They have remained a potent mode of communicating an issue or contention to a larger national audience. Yatras, whether on foot or on vehicles

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[111] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/west/story/narendra-modi-begins-month-long-vivekanand-yuva-vikas-yatra-115742-2012-09-11

can have myriad effects[112], and can serve very well in the activation of popular support for a political leader in times of personalization (Kumar, 2017). Such programs that can take the form of events, and a series of such events full of spectacles aid in the populist aim of 'constant mobilisation' of the electorate. Politicized festivals marking the
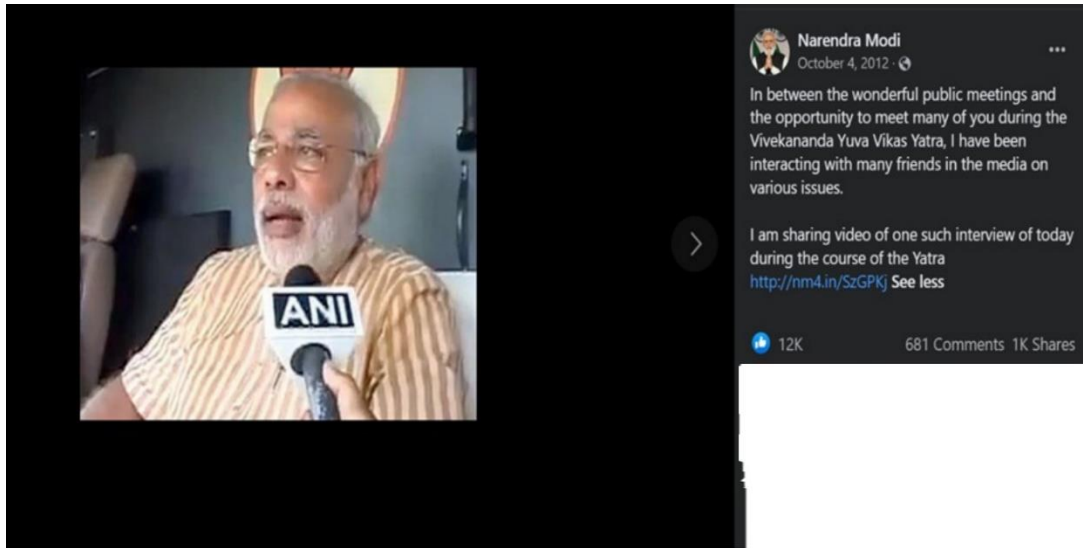

Fig. 17

minutest of the state apparatus's activities can play a similar role, such as auditing of a particular public service infrastructure e.g., public schools. Mundane visits no longer suffice; the inauguration and dedication ceremonies of infrastructural forms for everyday use by citizens such as bridges and tunnels take a festival-like form. It gives the electorate a sense of agency, a sense of being part of the exercise of sovereignty, giving a sense of 'belonging-ness' as a people. The fabrication process for a 'people' requires a 'repertoire of ritual actions and symbols that are combined and repeated in various forms', resulting in considerable emotional impact (Berezin, 2006). Such 'event-alization' enhances bonhomie and conviviality between state power, the regime and its subjects, opening channels of acclamation and celebration of the political leader among the electorate.

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[112] They can have polarizing effects as well, as seen in the rath yatra of ex-BJP supremo L.K. Advani in 1990 which called for a 'reclamation' of the deity Rama's birthplace. It eventually culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid
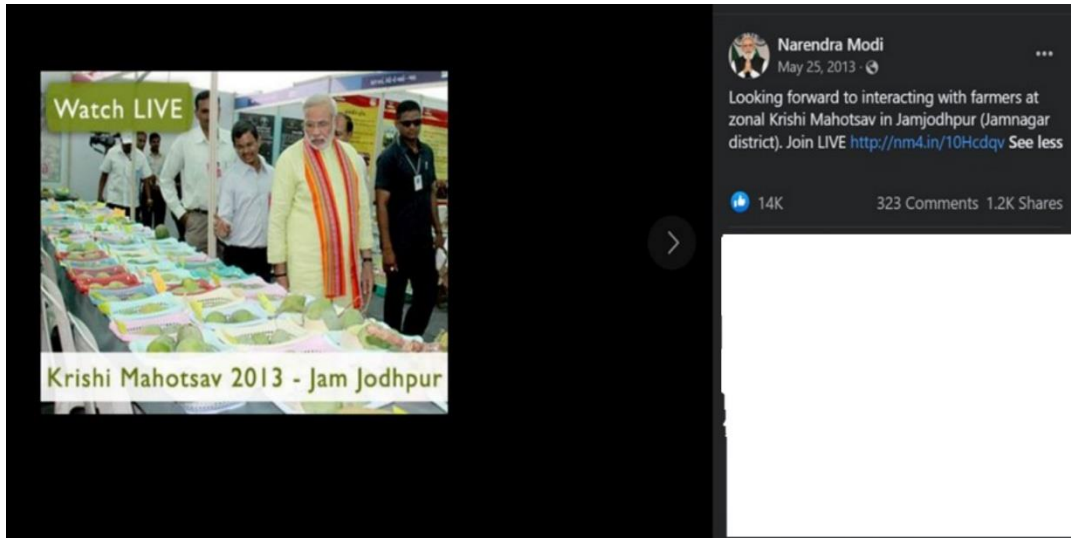
Fig. 18: A 'Krishi Mahotsav' (Agrarian festival) organized by the Gujarat government in 2012

3b The man-at-arms

Brand Modi's masculine, robust, populist leadership stands at the cross-roads of two discursive historical traditions - one of masculinity and one of austerity/consumption. Modi presents an opportunity to rejuvenate a Hindu masculinity that has sub-consciously presented itself as having been rendered effeminate through acquiescence to foreign rule - the British, and before them the Mughals. The present dominant manifestations of Indian masculinity, it is true, has been shaped by colonial rule to some extent. The colonial discourse had a tendency to treat certain races as 'effeminate' and not fit to rule themselves (and thus could better serve as clerical staff to the empire). On the other hand, certain other subjugated ethnicities, such as the Sikhs and the Gorkhas, were treated as 'martial races'. The effeminized Hindu masculinity sought to assert itself through various cultural modes through the pre- and post-independence period (Srivastava, 2015). The contemporary avenue for Hindu masculine realization provided by the PM is one that offers muscular protection from enemies, internal and external, as compared to the more staid, silent Manmohan Singh (Sinha, 2017). But given the PM's transformation from austere kurta-clad pracharak to flamboyant leader clad in Armani suits and Bvlgari watches, scholars detect a certain permissiveness that encourages consumption in the modern neo-liberal economy for all genders. Such consumption, however, is tempered by the strictures of the

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extant Hindu social hierarchy and duties of kinship ties, and is a form of moral consumption that allows one to straddle both worlds at once (Srivastava, 2015).

As has been discussed above, one of the striking visual features that distinguishes Modi (especially from his immediate predecessor) is his corporeal presence of a strong masculine front. His allegedly celibate, vegetarian life ties into Hindu cultural notions of disciplined, dedicated, self-sacrificing masculinity. This image meshes well with the promotion of Modi as an enthusiastic Prime Minister to the armed forces who cares deeply for them. He celebrates important festivals with them in remote, difficult terrain and valiantly rides military equipment, leading from the front.

Fig. 19 The PM celebrating Diwali with soldiers in Gurez Valley, Jammu and Kashmir, 2017
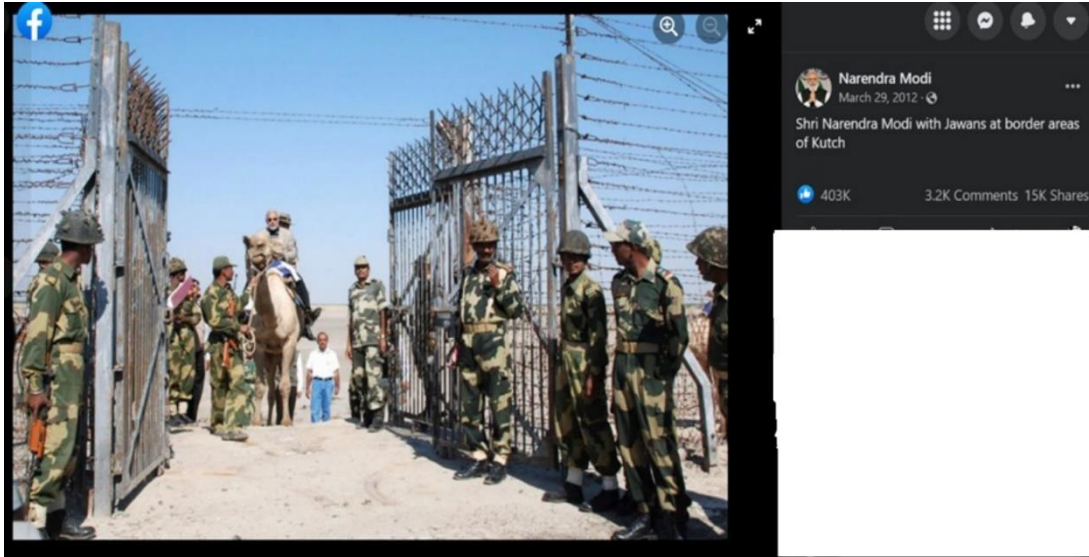
Fig. 20 The then CM Modi riding a horse around jawans in the border area of Kutch

Fig. 21

Fig. 21 instantiates the photographic archive that PM Modi has built over the decades. Images such as this (from 1999) connote a man who has always been close to the armed forces and also shares the qualities of discipline and valour with them[113].

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[113] Another well-circulated photograph of the PM is of him unfurling the national flag in Srinagar in 1991, at the height of insurgency in the state, thus furnishing impeccable credentials as a nationalist and Hindu braveheart.
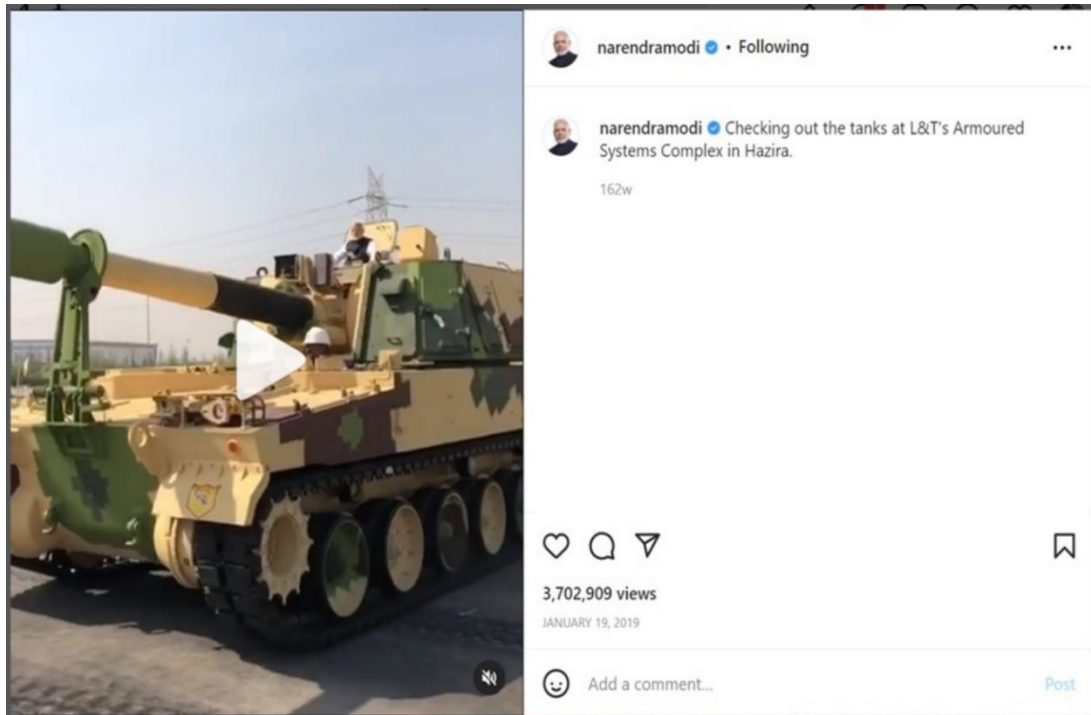
Fig. 22

3d The Yogi: Mastery of the body and mind

Modi's physical prowess is also displayed through his annual images celebrating the International Day of Yoga. He is usually pictured surrounded by children and youth as he leads them in performing various yoga exercises. This helps in pinning down the image of a civilizational leader even more, as in addition to physical virility he also becomes ambassador to the world of the national brand, advertising an ancient, Hindu practice meant to enhance well-being through his very corporeal form (Kaur, 2020).

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

4 The folksy leader

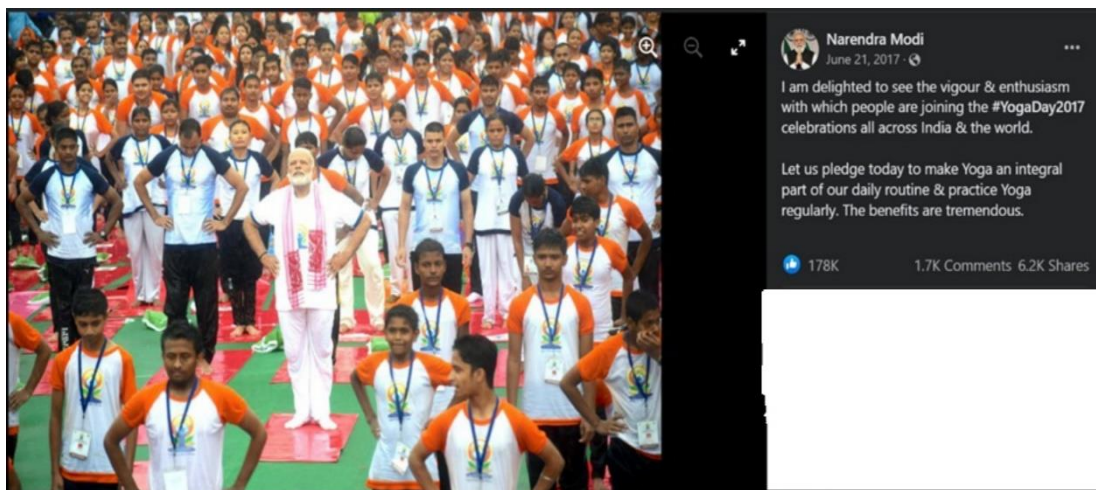When we examine the visual presence of Modi, Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi on social media platforms in the cultural register, we find that Modi and Kejriwal are far more adept at speaking in a 'folksy' and engaging manner compared to Gandhi. Modi has always had

a penchant for coming up with the choicest witty barbs against the Opposition. These were tongue-in-cheek and easy to remember and transmit, thus becoming quite popular. These barbs often involved wordplay and abbreviations. However, unlike other populist leaders such as Trump, Raila Odinga, Duterte etc. none of them have been caught speaking in a 'low' or 'vulgar' language, even while mocking political opponents. All three leaders were often pictured in traditional attire of the various regions of the country when they visited them for meetings and rallies, as has become a norm in Indian electoral politics.

Fig. 25

Fig. 26

5 A leader of the Hindu nation

All three leaders are Hindu, and have images prominently displaying forms of banal religiosity. Modi has the most images with him not just praying at temples but also deeply immersed in rituals. Commentators have remarked that larger political currents of the country are reflected in the various Hindu ceremonial rituals that Rahul Gandhi has partaken in at temples (Fig. 31). Kejriwal's image, on the other hand, has been projected as a 'common' family man, someone who engages in Hindu prayers together with his family on auspicious Hindu occasions. All three politicians have prominently displayed images on social media that portray them offering tribute to religious icons of the marginalized castes, especially saints such as Ravidas and Basava. In this, too, Modi has been more prolific than others.

Fig. 27

Fig. 28

117
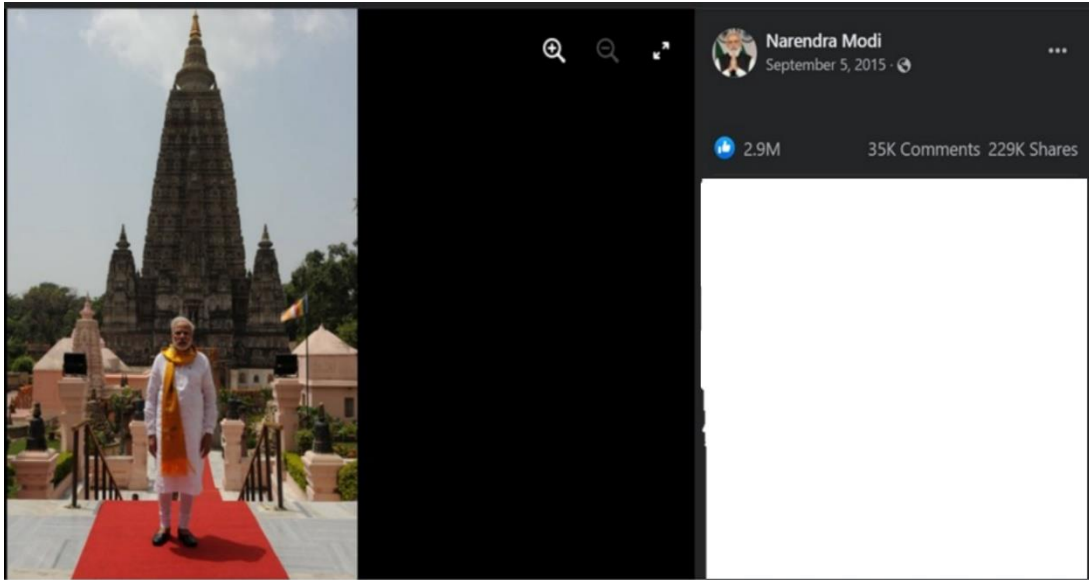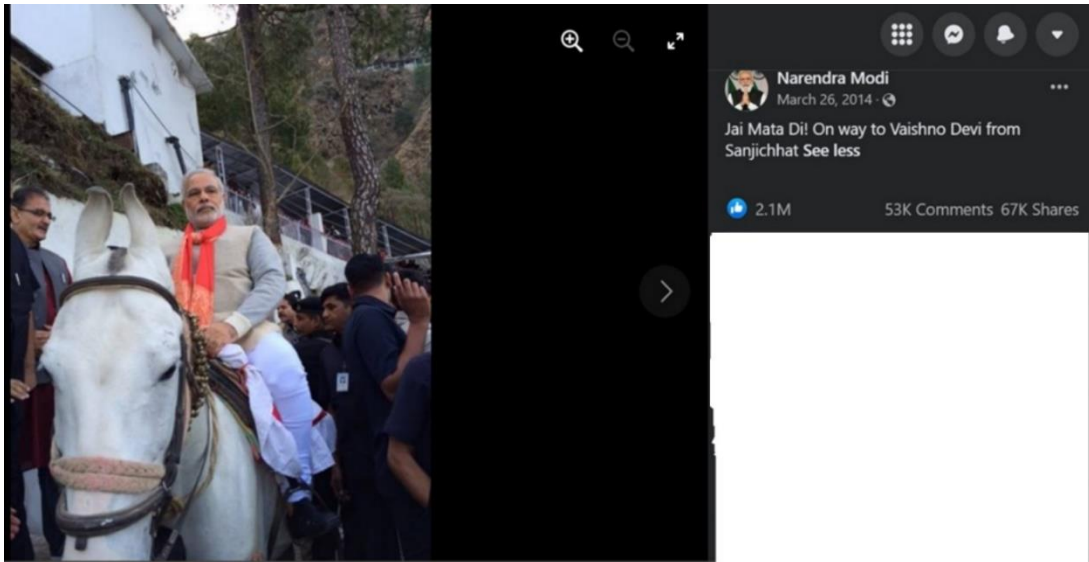
Fig. 29

Fig. 30

The image above is especially significant, given the intense attempts made by the BJP to make electoral inroads into West Bengal. Here the Prime Minister is seen paying his respects to the religious leader of the Matua community, a Scheduled Caste community that has been courted by political parties due to their electoral impact. The image was from the campaign trail before the 2019 elections.

Fig. 31

Fig. 32

Fig. 33

Fig. 34

Fig. 35

Rahul Gandhi has staked a claim to a legacy of 'janeu'-wearing Brahmin blood through his father's lineage (the Nehru family was of Kashmiri Pandit extraction). It is significant that he shared this image of a martial Parshuram (Fig. 35), a mythological Brahmin sage. Of all Brahmin icons from mythology, Parashuram's image is the one that is used for an assertion of force. Stickers and posters bearing his image usually show him as a lithe, muscular warrior, perhaps 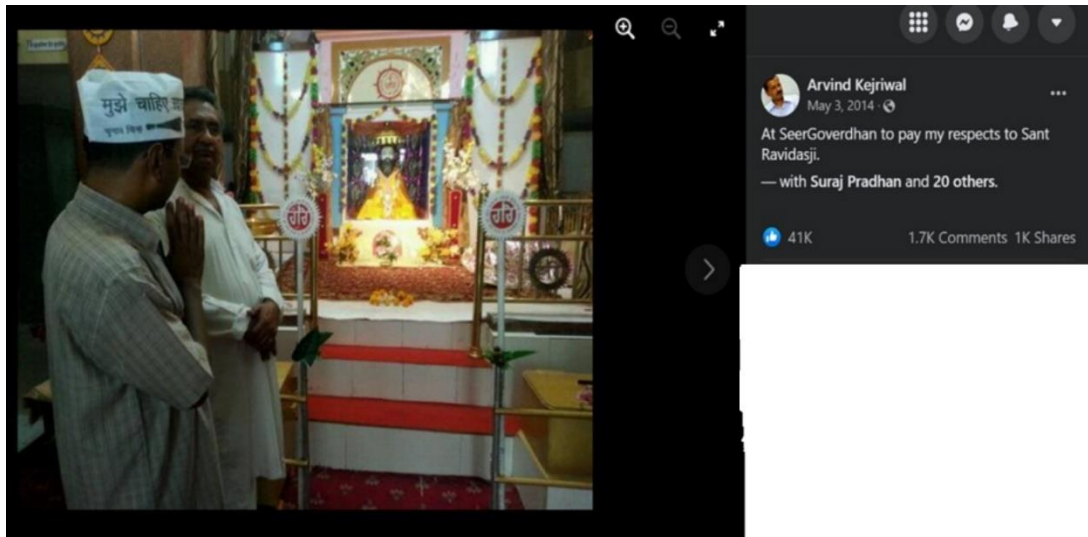the only Brahmin character to be portrayed in such a manner. The mythological tale of Parashuram states that he had exterminated the male members of the Kshatriya caste (the caste attributed with martial affairs) 21 times. After Ajay Singh Bisht (known as Yogi Adityanath), a non-Brahmin belonging to the powerful Thakur upper caste, came to power in the electorally crucial state the Brahmins of the state have had grievances regarding the parcelling out of state resources and power. Opposition parties such as Rahul Gandhi's Congress, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party have courted UP's Brahmin population using the figure of Parashuram[114]. This martial image of Parshuram has been used as a signifier of caste pride by Brahmins, in imitation of other such figures used by Rajputs and other caste groups.

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[114] https://www.news9live.com/india/explained-parashuram-mythic-eradicator-of-kshatriyas-in-the-land-of-yogi-144351

Parashuram is not the only mythological figure to have undergone a transformation into an increasingly war-like, aggressive figure. In popular circulation one also finds stickers and t-shirts of the 'angry' Hanuman, the half-human and half-simian Hindu deity (the creator of the angry Hanuman image has also been praised by the PM). Earlier artists of Hanuman portrayed him with the physically 'fit' but not butch and muscular, as he was associated with indigenous forms of wrestling in India. He was also epitomised as a figure of loyalty, wisdom and devotion, especially with regard to Ram, in spite of his considerable feats of strength[115].

5a Warrior Ram as epitome of manhood

The deity Ram himself has undergone a transformation into a more '*ugra*' form in images that have been in heavy circulation since the 1980s. His contemporary images often feature him with a bow drawn, and a muscular body. Scholars have traced this transformation to the Ram Janambhoomi movement of the Hindu Right and the demolition of Babri Masjid. The dominant corporeal motif when it came to deities (ever since the proliferation of a popular, visual mass media since the 19th century) was of a supple, soft, fleshy body. The potency of deities lay in a transcendental realm, and a corporeal manifestation of the same was unwarranted (Jain, 2007). This was the mould in which actors-turned-politicians of the South such as MGR and NTR shaped themselves, adding to their popularity (Jain, 2004). These are images that have been in popular circulation, and are ubiquitous, especially in public and semi-private spaces in Northern India, in posters, stickers etc. and now in digital form. These happenings are quite germane to this research, as one can find contemporary imaginations of popular gender performances in these images.

There is, however, some debate among scholars regarding the impact that Hindutva and the Ram Janambhoomi movement had on the more muscular pictorial imagination of Ram (Jain, 2004). Scholars such as Lutgendorf have opined that there have always been local deities in India with a rather 'aggressive' disposition[116]. Association of deities with the potency for warfare also has a long lineage, as rival monarchs would arrange for the

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[115] https://openthemagazine.com/features/politics-features/general-election-2019/the-cult-of-hanuman/
[116] https://openthemagazine.com/features/politics-features/general-election-2019/the-cult-of-hanuman/

circulation of the figure of deities around a kingdom to establish suzerainty. At the same time, the growing cinematic archive of Bollywood and Hollywood had no lack of muscle-bound action heroes, and these seeped into the popular imagination not only through the screen, but also through images. In the case of Bollywood, this was especially so during the period around the Emergency, with the 'angry young man' of Amitabh Bachchan being particularly popular (Jain, 2004). Thus, it can be said with some amount of confidence that the socio-economic and political winds during the period was ripe for the re-imagining of the bodies of deities.

The then BJP leader L.K. Advani was often seen in rallies holding up a bow and arrow, ushering in a more martial Ram. Not only is Ram now a warrior god-king holding at bay Muslim usurpers, he is also the 'Maryada Purushottam', the epitome of masculine virtues (Davis, 2007). This chain that connects the masculine ideal from deities to screen 'heroes' to politicians has been productively mined by quite a few politicians over the last decade. Mulayam Singh Yadav from the Samajwadi Party was a wrestler before becoming a politician of national importance. He used this to great effect as being emblematic of the hardy, strong physical and mental character of the Yadavs and Ahirs, communities whose occupation in the Hindu caste system was to be cowherds. This is particularly significant, for these communities trace their lineage to the god Krishna, whose image in mythology, too, is attached to the tending of cattle. In this alternate construction, Krishna, the cow-herding god, stands for the democratic upsurge of marginalized folk, and also battles foreign invaders such as Muslims. By dint of kinship ties with leaders such as Mulayam Singh Yadav their followers feel they share in the same masculine virtues (Michelutti, 2013). The aspiration/performance of masculinity at that historical juncture, thus, was entangled with the new image of the gods, which in turn influenced the new virile masculinity that political leaders exude.

6 The ideal male leader

As the putative masculine ideal, there are virtues beyond the martial and the yogic that the Prime Minister's image has often expressed. Ingrained in the muscular figure is also the tireless worker who doesn't rest and devotes 14-16 hours a day to working for the nation. Even at nearly 70 years of age the labour for a 'New India' is incessant, as expressed in

Fig. 36. This also serves as an ideal for the individual of neo-liberal 'New India', who works beyond the confines of the 8-hour workday in the pursuit of increased productivity, and hardly takes time off (unlike the culture of erstwhile politicians and bureaucrats, notorious for shirking work). The tweet is from an interview with the Bollywood star Akshay Kumar before the 2019 elections that presented several mundane yet intimate details of the Prime Minister's daily life (which as ever seems carefully calibrated to strengthen the effect of personal closeness that such discourses hope to prop up).

Fig. 36

6a The affable, avuncular friend of the family

This personalized touch delivered to voters' screens across the country had other components. The Prime Minister had a program aimed at students about to appear for examinations. 'Pariksha pe charcha' has become an annual affair since 2018, where the PM interacts with students, teachers and parents, ostensibly providing tips on how to appear for gruelling tests without anxiety and stress. The PM has even come out with a

book titled 'Exam Warriors' which carries chapters along these lines. These interactions have a very affable air, again intensifying the intimate touch of a political leader who is almost in the role of a genial uncle to the family dispensing sage advice with humour and witticism. Fig. 37, for instance, is a screenshot of one such interaction, the video of which was uploaded to the Prime Minister's official Twitter handle. In the video, a concerned mother asks the PM for advice regarding her child who spends too much time playing games on a mobile phone. The PM quips in response – "Yeh PUBG wala hai kya?" "Is he one those PUBG people?" to widespread applause and laughter. This displays intimate knowledge of the lifeworld of teenagers and their recreational practices, thus ingratiating him further to them as someone who is 'hip'. This building of connections with the 9th-12th standard students is a part of the image-making of the PM as someone who shapes the minds and lives of the younger generation.

Fig. 37

7 The spirit of volunteerism

Modi's appeal to the nation to donate time and labour in pursuit of electoral victory and then flagship projects have also been quite effective. Especially before the 2014 elections several of his visual posts reach out directly to ordinary Facebook users and his followers to contribute generously to 'Mission 272+', the NDA's quest to achieve a majority in the Lok Sabha. Such an approach creates the impression of a 'people-powered' groundswell of support, with the only determining factors being the unfiltered connection between the political leader and the user. There was also a lot of crowd-sourced, unwaged, volunteer labour that Modi's online followers carried out, such as translating his speeches and writings into different Indian languages and then making them available online (Fig. 38). All of this was happening through the official social media handles of Modi, not the BJP. In addition, Modi also makes periodic appeals to the electorate to send in questions and suggestions, for various media program formats, and these are uploaded as attractive visuals on social media. On programs such as the much-publicised 'Mann Ki Baat' radio show he reads out some of these and answers them.
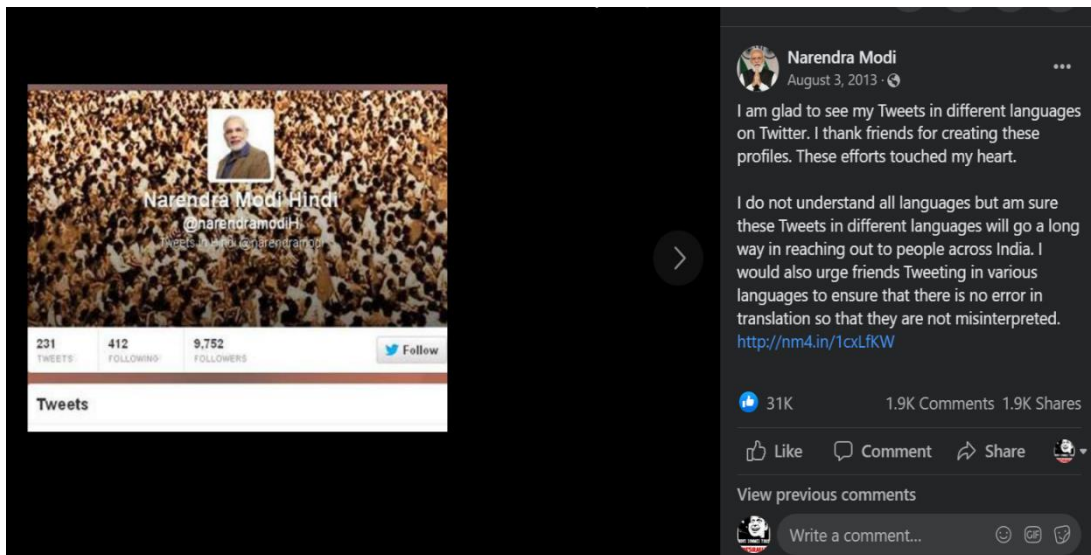
Fig. 38
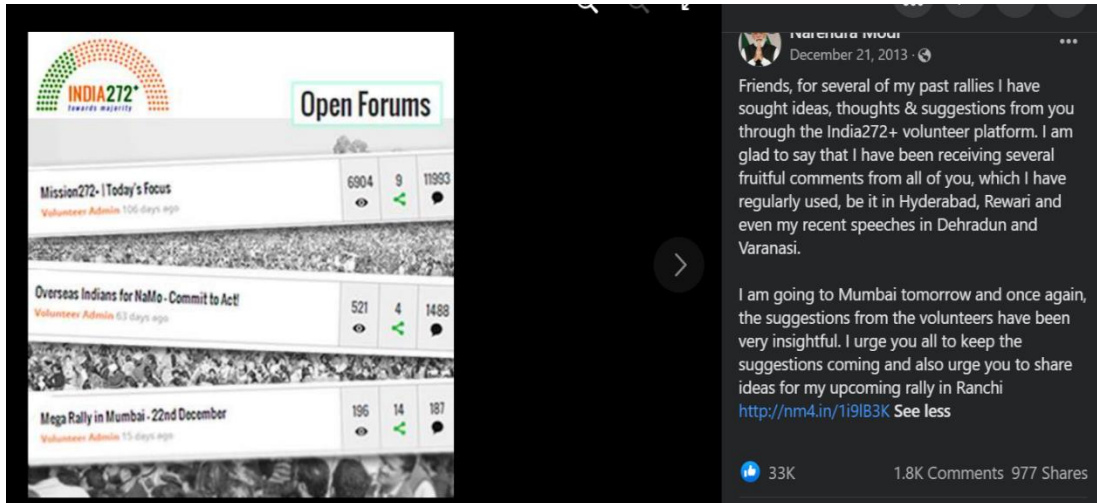
Fig. 39

Fig. 40

7a The Swacch Bharat Abhiyan

Modi also appeals for citizen participation in important and flagship public policy drives, such as the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan. Here, too, he seeks to galvanize through his corporeal presence. There are widely liked images of him cleaning streets with a broom, a task usually assigned to municipal janitorial staff, a task considered menial and deeply ridden with caste-based stigma. He has roped in some of the most prominent celebrities of the country for this task. Again, the affective force field around such imagery is one that is identified with Hindu civilizational ethos – *sewa* and *daan*. This vocabulary has for long been a part of Indian politics, with Gandhi and then Vinoba Bhave and others who followed in their footsteps, and is again steeped with the singular flavour of the 'saintly idiom'. The image-work approximating towards iconicity also includes remarkable images of Modi washing the feet of *safai karmacharis,* the sanitation staff of India's urban municipal corporations. These are rituals that can activate intense affective linkages with piety as they are reminiscent of Hindu reformist groups like the Arya Samaj.

comes to realising the dream of a Swachh Bharat!

I salute each and every person making a contribution towards a Swachh Bharat

Fig. 41

Fig. 42

129
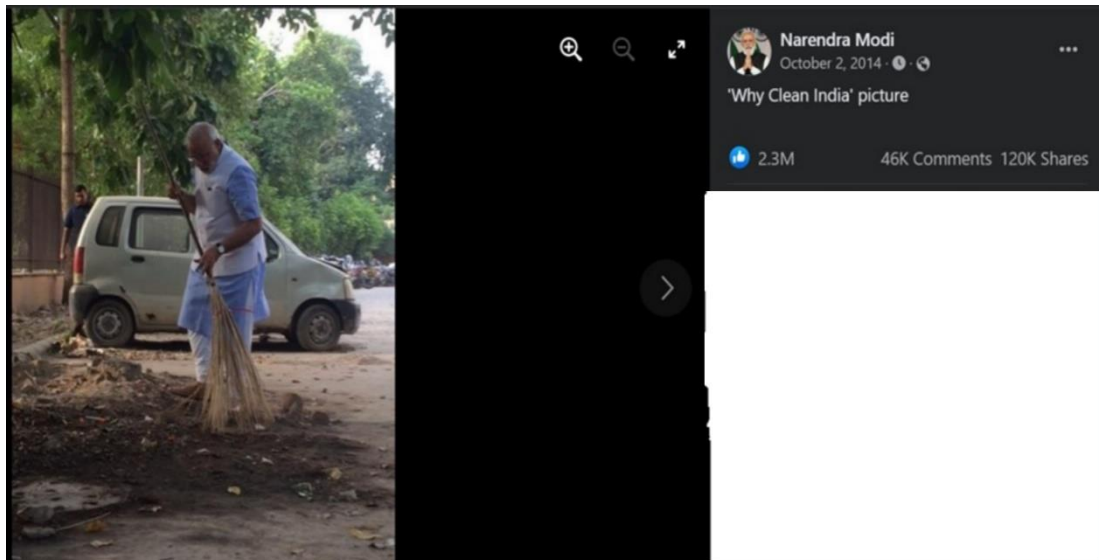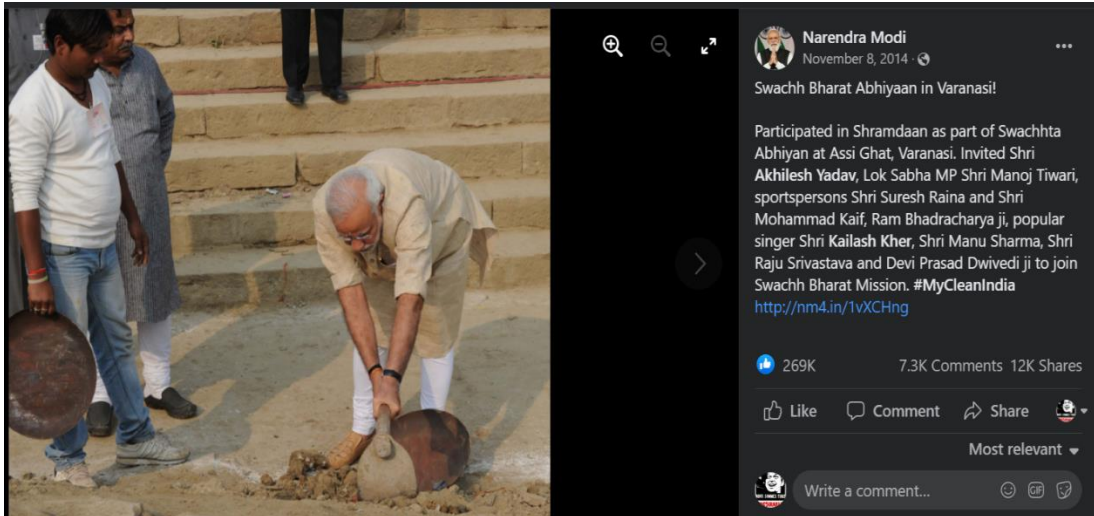
Fig. 43
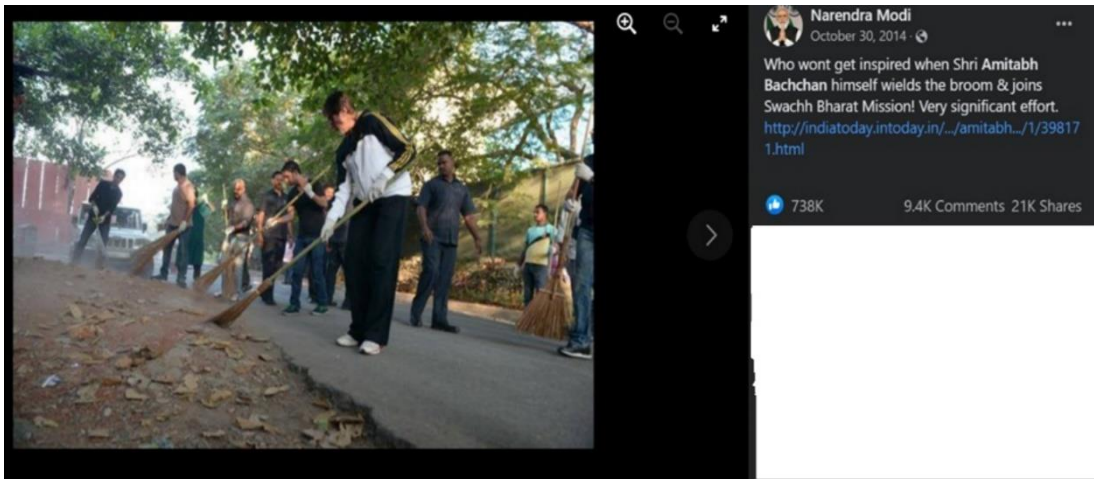
Fig. 44

The cleaning of public spaces has remained a trademark of many civil society drives over the decades, as inadequate sanitation and unclean public roads pose not just a health hazard but are also considered to mar the picture of New India that is aspired for. This appealed to the middle-class public drive as well as giving dignity to marginalized Indians, a la Gandhi.

7b The 'Mai bhi chowkidaar' campaign

In furtherance of the image-work of a leader who identified with the under-privileged, the 'common man' Modi's motto for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was 'Mai bhi chowkidar' ('I, too, am a watchman'). It was designed to give the impression of a leader fighting tirelessly against corruption and 'black money', and is inviting the average voter to join the battle, giving a sense of empowerment and exercise of power. Modi also had a virtual meeting with security guards and watchmen from around the country.

Fig. 45

Fig. 46

The counter-offensive ('Chowkidaar hi chor hai') that the Congress put into effect against the PM's #MaibhiChowkidaar campaign led the BJP to double down on their message. They disseminated new campaign anthems on the PM's social media handles featuring citizens taking up the role of the 'Chowkidaar' as well as volunteers for the 'Swacch Bharat Abhiyan'.

Narendra Modi @narendramodi · Mar 20, 2019

इन्होंने चौकीदारों का अपमान किया, आज पूरा देश चौकीदार बनकर खड़ा हो गया है।

चौकीदार शब्द देशभक्ति का पर्याय बन गया है।

345.6K views   0:17 / 1:20

8,759   21.2K   74.4K

Fig. 47

The Congress attempted to have their own interactive programs with Rahul Gandhi but events 'Apni Baat Rahul ke Saath' could not compete for the same levels of success as the PM's always-on interactive PR juggernaut that had been in operation without stopping for years one end.

I met a group of really interesting students from all over India, for dinner a few days ago. I learnt a lot from the wonderful exchange of ideas & perspectives. Here's a short video with the highlights of our interaction.

#ApniBaatRahulKeSaath

APNI BAAT
RAHUL
KE SAATH

▶ 186.5K views   0:00 / 4:49 🔊 ⚙ ⤢

💬 3.5K   ↻ 7.9K   ♡ 26K   ⬆

Fig. 48

7c Kejriwal's volunteerism

Kejriwal also inspired great effervescence, especially amongst the middle-classes and the lower middle-classes. This effervescence was carried forward from the India Against Corruption movement, and inspired some volunteer efforts from citizens. Kejriwal's official handle featured several such images of citizens giving up their luxuries in order to contribute to the Aam Aadmi Party's campaign funds. It also featured children giving up their piggy banks for the campaign, stressing home the point that there was tremendous support among the 'common man' for the image projected by muffler-clad Kejriwal, who had worked towards an image of a middle-class salary-men who had had enough of corruption in the state sector. The submergence of the ideological vision in the figure of the leader is apparent here too, as we can see the children playing dress-up as Kejriwal, cementing the leader-centric vision.

Fig. 49

Fig. 50
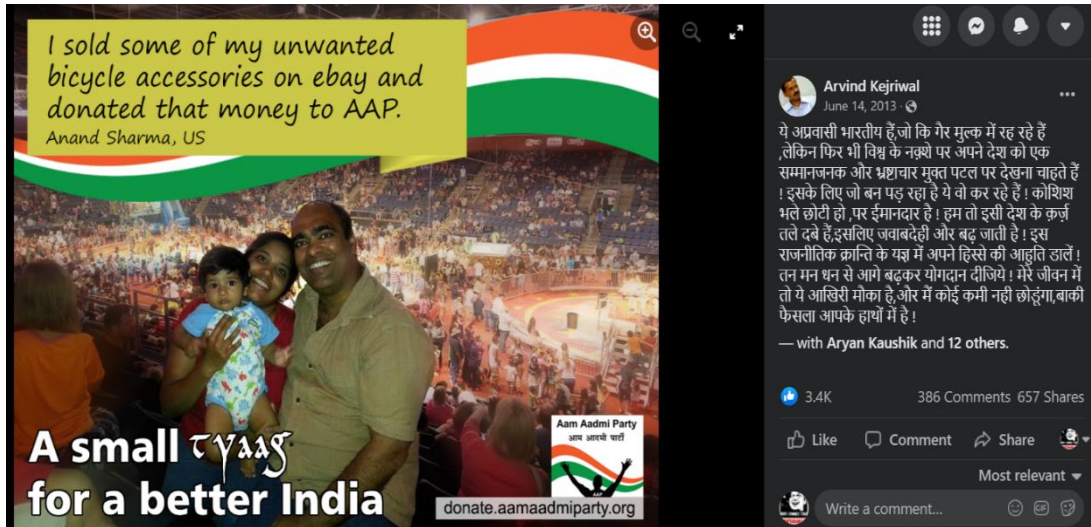
Fig. 51
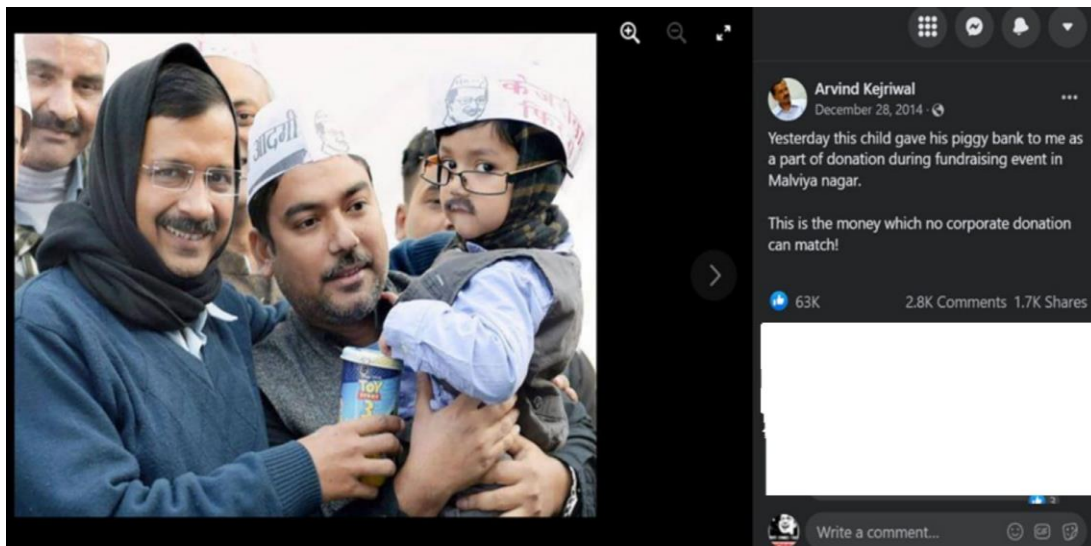
Fig. 52

The fore-grounding of such processes in media creates the ecology necessary to radiate a sense of massive enthusiasm for the political leader. Unlike in traditional electronic media, however, here social media platforms do not merely transmit the information of massive support and 'electability' of Modi. The performative aspects of the leader's direct call/appeal to ordinary voters-users, and the response of ordinary users as the 'people' volunteering sets up a particular 'media ecology' brimming with enthusiasm and affective

energy that is not confined to mere statistics (de Franco, 2016). These platforms, through their affordances, play host to this ecology that spreads bleeds out beyond their confines.

8 Distinctions: Modi, Gandhi, Kejriwal

Our exhaustive study of the variegated populist appeal of the three leaders has been presented in thematic sections. We have seen the various stylistic idioms adopted through their physique, personality, speech, witticisms, clothing etc. meant to call upon and mobilise the 'people' – the Gandhian, the literary, the militant acetic, the devout Hindu, the masculine and the muscular, the call to volunteerism etc. The differences in 'style' among the three also become apparent in the course of our study. Among the three, Rahul Gandhi's figure seems to possess the least amount of 'iconicity'. There are no popular silhouettes, masks or sartorial items related to him. His plain white kurtas or t-shirts, jeans and jackets do not seem to invite any amount of image-work, from his own party members or volunteers. This is in stark contrast to both Modi and Kejriwal, who have singular pieces of clothing attached to them. In the case of Modi, there have been multiple trademark attires that have transformed over time, from the Modi kurta to his later style that seemed to recall Rabindranath Tagore. For Kejriwal, his attire has been careful to never veer away from that of a middle-class house-holder, with shirts, trousers and sweaters and the trademark muffler reminiscent of the average salaryman and tradesperson of Delhi or much of the country. There are also no moves to imitate Rahul Gandhi by his followers, as is seen in the case of Modi and Kejriwal.

The PM's image has always been ubiquitous in inaugurations and announcements of infrastructural and technocratic projects since his Gujarat days. He often counts among his achievements his initiatives in transportation and beautification of urban and peri-urban areas of Gujarat, and his visual presence on social media instantiates this. This is part of the image-work that has established him as an accomplished technocrat. This image-work also includes his early adoption of technological forms such as social media, and the tweets to reflect this. These work in conjunction with his 'hi-tech' forms of outreach such as holograms, which signal to different population groups his intended image of a '*Vikash Purush*' who pushes for technological advancement as the path to 'development'. The scholarship on social media adoption by political leaders from the

Global South has often stated this as one of the principal reasons. Statistical surveys may reveal only a limited percentage of the electorate uses social media, for political reasons or otherwise. However, such surveys miss out on the political communication aspect, the role of 'signaling' in such adoption of social media. This might be a part of the image-work of a technocrat that might prove attractive for mobilisation. It can also be used to 'signal' elites and the youth, the demographic most likely to be on social media platforms. In India, the middle-class has an ideological hegemony far greater than its tiny population numbers, and discourse and debate on social media is often driven by them.
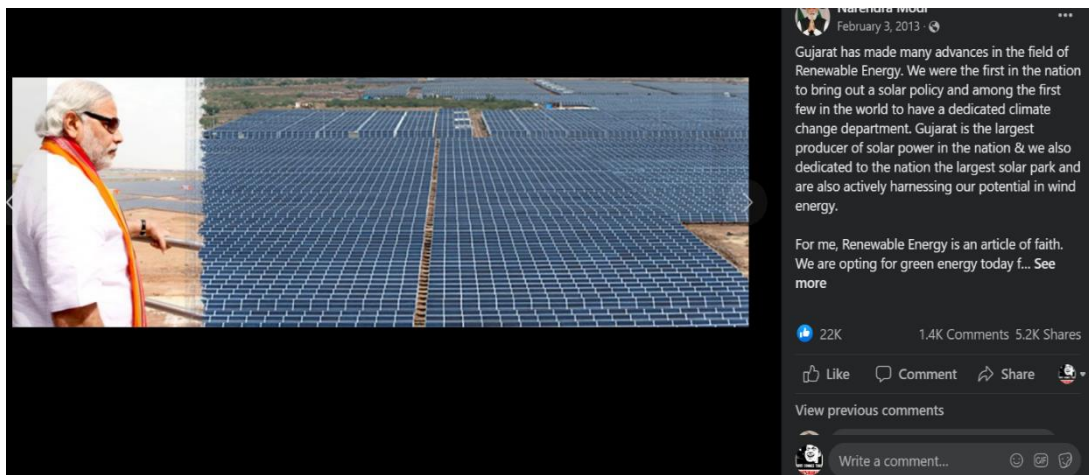
Fig. 53
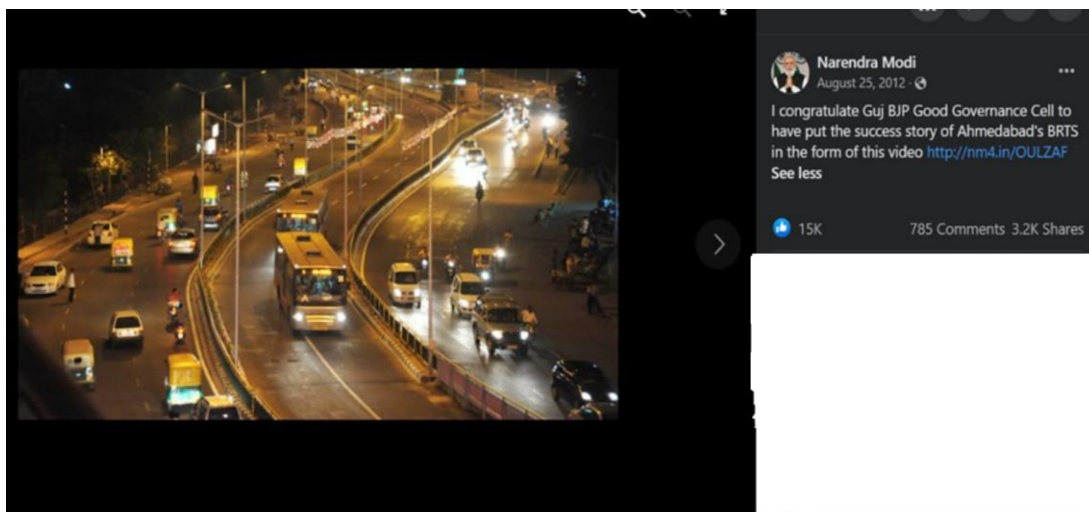
Fig. 54
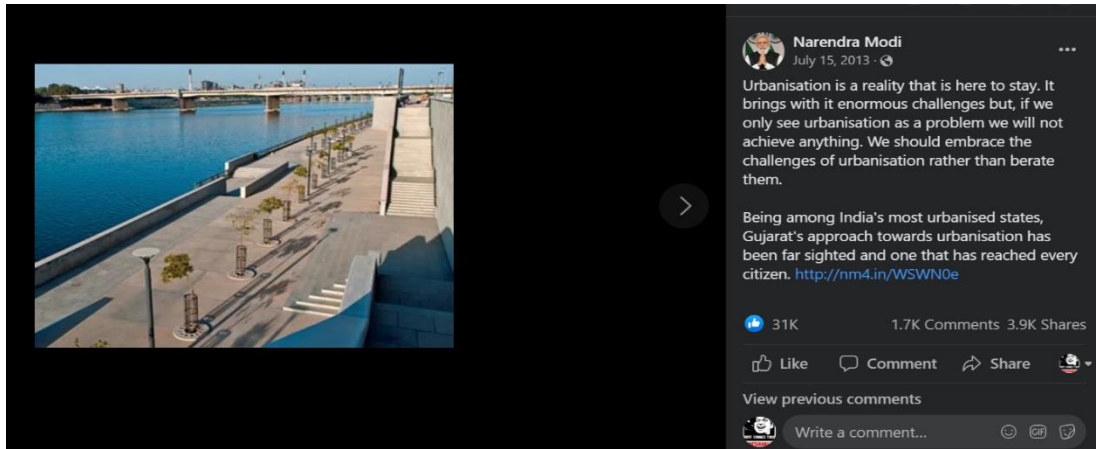
Fig. 55

Kejriwal has not had access to such events of inaugurating mega-infrastructure projects because of the constitutional limitations on the power of the Delhi state government. Thus, his image-work in establishing his technocratic governance credentials depend upon inauguration of '*mohalla*' (neighbourhood) clinics and initiatives for school education, two fields where the AAP government has frequently claimed significant advances in Delhi.
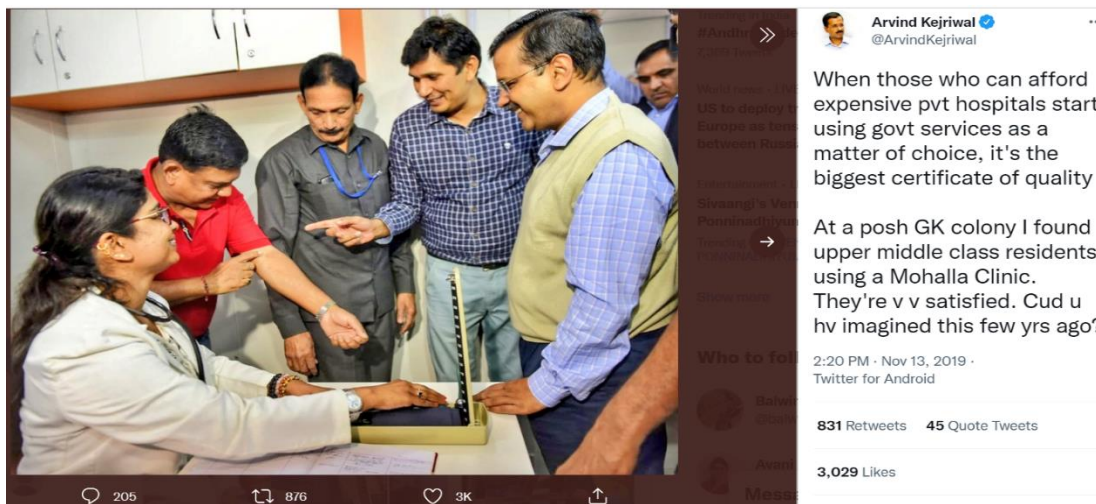
Fig. 56

8a Rahul Gandhi

Rahul Gandhi's image-work does not seem to include any attempt to establish himself as a technocrat. This might be due to his lack of access to positions of governance where he

can visually associate with massive technological projects, whether 'digital' or more conventional ones such as tech-infrastructure. He has been rather late to the social media sphere compared to the other two politicians, and has made no significant 'signalling' efforts through proximity or affinity to technological forms (except perhaps being an enthusiastic participant in selfies taken by followers, as we will see in the next chapter). It is, however, an interesting point considering that the UPA governments of the past did have a significant technocratic dimension, and had several leaders exemplifying this, not least the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself. The UPA's image-work had a significant developmentalist flavour, albeit one that was in line with the structural changes brought on by liberalization. 'Private-public partnerships' and forms of private accumulation of capital and surplus were the dominant flavours, buoyed by the windfall in the stock markets, especially during UPA-I. This image was tempered with large-scale state-led employment and welfare schemes, which as we will see in Chapter 5 paid little dividend for the Congress and its allies in 2014, as they did not receive credit for it. The UPA I was seen as wasteful through its welfare regimes, as credit for the successes in the markets was given to corporate entities both individual and collective. The UPA helmed government was seen as more hindrance than help in this regard. The UPA's image-work mostly involved forms of the old 'civic nationalism' that had a secular character in that it was for the most part inclusive of all religious identities.

The 2019 Congress campaign with Rahul Gandhi as the Prime Ministerial candidate had a slew of welfarist measures under the slogan '*ab hoga nyay*'. They pointed out the alleged short-comings of the ruling regime regarding unemployment and facile policies. The move did not seem to have much takers, however, as the regime had its own welfarist policies in play for electoral gains despite its pro-corporate image, policies it made sure were credited to the PM. We will discuss this further in the 5th chapter. Critiques of economic policies of the government for being in thrall of foreign and corporate interests cannot be taken at face value as this has always been a talking point for successive Opposition parties. The BJP as an opposition party was heavily critical of allowing Foreign Direct Investment into the Indian economy, a position it has since reversed after coming to power.

Rahul Gandhi is also the only one among these three leaders who has explicitly displayed his caste markers in the images we have studied, through his claim to a Brahmin ancestry. The PM's visual timeline is free of any specific caste calling cards, although he may have used it in offline speeches to mobilise voters. The 'tea-seller to CM to PM' narrative may have had a certain discursive caste angle aimed at attracting OBC votes, but such elements do not readily present themselves in our data-set. This, perhaps, would not sync well with his campaigns premise of a 'New India' that does not think along the narrow lines of caste but thinks of the nation (as we will see in Chapter 5 the BJP has been adept at configuring the caste equation in key states to suit their electoral needs). Caste hierarchies, caste discrimination and atrocities are overwhelmed by discourses of aspiration, upward mobility and nationalist fervour. Kejriwal, too, does not have images speaking of caste and kinship ties. The 'aam aadmi' of the AAP is an abstract, contemporary, neo-liberal citizen that does not think of the political along those lines, which have traditionally been framed as repositories of corrupt and nepotistic politics. One refrain that is constant for all the three leaders is the annual image of greeting and/or them paying obeisance at the shrine of a saints related to marginalized caste communities, such as Sant Ravidas.

Where Rahul Gandhi has carved a niche for himself is in situating himself as 'secular', as the principal national electoral challenge to Hindutva (in spite of his claims to a Pandit legacy). While there are far more successful regional leaders and parties espousing secularism, Gandhi remains yet to be eclipsed. He also associates at liberty and at ease with any symbols associated with Islam.

With the data we have seen in this chapter, we can see that Rahul Gandhi also has a substantial visual performative oeuvre just like the PM. However, if we take Laclau's dictum that all politics is to varying degrees populist, and taking populism as a spectrum in the political, it would seem Rahul Gandhi's populism score is much lower than Kejriwal and the PM. His rise to prominence as a leader whose personalization is important in the context of national electoral politics in India is due to the important structural shifts in electoral politics, mass media's coverage and social media platforms after the Lok Sabha elections. Elections became a personality contest with the rise of the PM and Kejriwal, and Rahul Gandhi became the most important Opposition figure in Lok Sabha elections.

This is also an important indicator of the 'Presidentialization' of India's parliamentary system. Following Mughan's defining analysis, Gandhi is more of a presidential-style candidate in an electoral system that has become more 'Presidentialized', starting to resemble more and more the American system (Mughan, 2000). Whether as a leader of a Parliamentary political party Gandhi has had a net negative or positive influence on the fortunes of the Congress party (per Mughan's argument) has to be investigated by other means and remains outside the scope of this thesis.

8b Populism and technocracy – a binary?

These co-ordinates we have established – the technocrat and the populist – seem tangled up in the figures of the political leaders we have discussed. We see that they challenge the spectrum established in the 'populism as style' approach, where technocracy and populism form the opposite poles of the spectrum, as we had discussed through Moffitt and others in the first chapter. This is a thread we shall pick up on as the thesis progresses and inquire upon the conclusions we reach.

Conclusion: The iconic leader

The hybrid approach of the Modi campaign for the 2014 elections often involved going to-and-fro between the 2-dimensional and the 3-dimensional, the virtual and the corporeal. But the powerful pull exerted by the visual aspects of this campaign owes much to the 'excess' that these representations of Modi carried. They condensed and bundled together multiple allusive and affective threads that went far beyond the surface of these representations. This was essential for the objective of elevating Modi's representations to iconic status and harnessing the power of iconicity (Srinivas, 2021). As Alexander argues, there is always an 'invisible depth' entangled with the surface of iconic images. Thus depth is co-constituted by the social, public discursive cache from which the connotative elements of representations are drawn (Alexander, 2012). The campaign tried to pin down many concepts to these representations of Modi – the developmentalism of the Gujarat model, the persistent, eternal civilisational ethos of a pre-Islamic Hindu India, robust Hindu masculinity mixed with asceticism, the suave swagger of self-confident neo-liberal consumption (Kaur, 2020).

Icons have a peculiar history and have traditionally been tied to religious figures. The Orthodox Christian Church promoted them, but the Catholic Church was opposed to them, given their iconoclasm and anti-idolatry. However, Pope Gregory I considered them important for the spiritual lives of the poor and illiterate (Binder, 2012). Icons, thus, had a role to play in ensuring social cohesion. It is tempting to consider politically iconic images of political leaders in this light. However, as discussed in the second chapter, such an approach risks the elision of politically significant participatory structures at play in the images of a political leader (as a heroic figure). Such structures are often the contingent product of history and politics of a particular space and time, in this case, post-colonial India. As Madhava Prasad has argued, they allow for a sense of participation in the exercise of sovereignty by the elected leader in a hierarchy with the leader at the top. Each iteration of Modi, whether on a two-dimensional screen or as a holographic projection in 3D, is a way of 'presencing' the leader in that particular space, an extension of the leader's body, and not merely a representation. Each iteration is a performative act of embodying the 'pinned down' concepts in the preceding paragraph, and addressing the viewer(s)/audience as such. The political leader is a 'hero' of sorts, operating against a background which features 'villainous' political opponents, institutions, the political establishment and critical media, a 'rogues gallery' united in their nefarious scheme to thwart the heroic leader (Nakassis, 2020).

It is not only the leader who is made 'present' through such images. Modi, Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi have images with a large number of likes that feature them addressing a crowd/audience. These photographic images are usually captured from behind the leader as he delivers a speech to the crowd. In these images, the 'public' sees itself manifest, and this is one of the many ways in which the ordinary user and follower get an idea of the existence of a 'people' arrayed around the leader (Hansen, 2015). In fact, scholars find similarities between the fan clubs/political associations that formed around cine-stars of the Southern states (who often turned to politics after a successful film career) and the ecology around political leaders such as the PM on social media platforms. Both are marked by excesses in performativity, which is often self-reflexive in nature, keeping in mind the stakes of garnering visibility, a valuable currency. The posts of the hero-leader generate a feeling of 'being seen' and acknowledged in the fan-follower-user (Sundaram,

2021). The distinctions between the well-heeled, reasoned bourgeois public sphere and that of the more visual plebian public sphere (often marked by an excess of enthusiasm, corporeality and violence) are no longer very tenable when it comes to social media platforms. The modern political troll is a figure par excellence of online spaces, leading vituperative and often offensive hate campaigns against opponents and critics of the political leader of their choice (Srinivas, 2021). Srinivas finds in such individuals echoes of the cine-star fan of Southern India, willing to take up cudgels against anyone who was to have slighted the 'hero' of whom they were fans.

We find a two-way logic of 'presencing' here, reminding us of the discussion from the first chapter regarding representation. While the figure of the political leader is always concretised in one elected representative, the leader makes present the 'people', an entity that is nebulous, amorphous and 'something that is nevertheless not present in fact or as a literal entity' (Disch, 2012). It is not merely the 'population' of this or that constituency/district/state/country the leader represents, but the 'people' he conjures through his claims. It is here that 'representation' witnesses a collapse of the 'aesthetic' and the 'political'. Following Spivak (who draws from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*), Madhava Prasad says this is a collapse of the '*darstellen*' and '*vertreiten*', two very different forms of the word 'represent' in German (Prasad, 1999). While the latter connotes a 'speaking or standing for someone' role that we understand in relation to electoral representatives, '*darstellen*' is representation as understood in the field of aesthetics, art and culture (Spivak, 1988). '*Darstellen*', in some ways, has been traced throughout the sections of this chapter in terms of the various populist, 'stylistic' forms of expression imbibed by the figures of these political leaders under discussion, such as acetic auras, masculinities, banal and 'hot' nationalisms etc. To reiterate, we can clearly see how the collapse of these two forms has happened in the course of the discussion thus far. This leads us to conclude that in the cases under study, we see a form of 'substitution' rather than 'representation' (Prasad, 1999), where the figure of the political leader accrues such significance that it seems to slip into the mystical realm of 'destiny' and 'kingship'. The legitimacy of such sovereigns seems to be an in-built, inevitable characteristic. This figure/image sometimes eclipses even the need for a 'background script' drawn from a 'cultural cache' *pace* Alexander, such that the script itself starts to be reformed *post-facto*

to suit the actions of the leader. We will keep revisiting this discussion and elaborating on it further to answer the questions regarding the leader and the 'people' in the next three chapters as we deal with more data.

Thus, the populist leader with whom the followers share a bond of immediacy and intimacy seems to be reforming the head of the body of the Leviathan, with the rest of the *body politic* serving as an extension. This head/leader serves as the expression of his followers in so far as the leader articulates the *volonté générale*. As our discussion has shown, this general will usually manifests as the will of the majority (often ethno-religious), against an elite and/or an enemy or the other. It might be considered paradoxical that this has been a result of democratisation and massification of politics. As Benjamin Arditi argued, populism is the 'inner periphery' of democracy rather than an aberrant external infection (Arditi, 2012). Although the construction of an eternal homeland, community and common culture is essential to the articulation of populism, it is in the fertile ground of the mass media that these populisms have flourished. In addition to the media-savviness and the structural advantages of populism in a mediatised polity, mass media also shapes contemporary publics.

It is not surprising, then, that ardent followers would engage in various practices that extend the corporeal reach of their beloved leader. This marks the ubiquitous presence of the leader in extended spatio-temporal contexts. The fan-followers do this by donning the leader's visage as masks, as in the case of Modi, or by dressing up as the leader in his trademark attire, as in the case of Kejriwal. These also make for great photo opportunities, especially if they involve children. In the case of Modi and Kejriwal, we see obvious attempts at imbibing or conjuring the physiognomy of the leader in the body of their supporters or volunteers in the form of masks, kurtas, mufflers and so on. There are imitators who attract attention through physical similarities or by dressing up as their favourite leader (the children in fig. 49 and 52). Such individual mimicry of leaders has usually been used in the Global North to mock politicians. Here, however, the follower mimicking the physiognomy and attire seems to seek a corporeal unity with the leader, leading some scholars to question if this is in the nature of a 'cult'-like following due to

religiosity being an integral part of the Indian public sphere (Mukherji, 2011). After all, Rahul Gandhi himself took recourse to having a look-alike of Modi in his rallies.

CHAPTER III

IMAGE POLITICS II: THE SELF(IE) MADE POPULIST

This chapter deals with another set of data pertinent to this research i.e. the official yet more 'informal' official images popularised by social media platforms – selfies. The chapter established how these photographs enable a performance of the desired narratives of politicians through social media platforms and how politicians play with the public-private divide to foster a sense of intimacy with their followers and the general electorate. This necessitates a deep discussion of the semiotic and affective aspects of these images and the weaponisation of the self as rhetoric by politicians. The chapter begins with the singular definitional aspects of selfies that require a closer look. We then look at selfies or 'selfie-adjacent' images of the three political leaders under discussion – The PM, Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi. The subsequent sections begin unpacking how selfies go beyond other official photographs in establishing a sense of closeness between the leader and the people in populism. The gestural politics involved in selfies and mobilisations around them are also discussed in detail. We look into a set of selfies from the official handles of the PM, Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal.

1 The official *neta* 'selfie'

The structural and impactful role played by the visage and figure of the political leader in a digitally mediated populist polity has been elaborated upon above and in the preceding chapters. It seems very strongly to be the case that these dynamics are very strongly at play when it comes to the Indian political leaders this research has triangulated upon. This section of the chapter shall involve the study of the official selfies of these politicians disseminated on social media platforms. Several political implications singular to these selfies with regard to the research questions at hand necessitate this closer look at selfies.

Even a cursory look at the official social media handles provides one largely with images that had been taken by official photographers and media-persons. There are largely in line with the public relations photographs seen in other media platforms. However, a lot of the leaders also post selfies from time to time; as mentioned before, some of the politicians organise selfie-based mobilisations for followers geared towards various causes. It, thus, becomes imperative for us to investigate the peculiarities of the politician's selfie and its potency.

1a On selfies

It is important to bear in mind that the selfie is not merely a continuation of the photographic legacy seen in other media platforms. The condition of its production and subsequent mode of distribution locates it squarely in contemporary networked culture. The selfie is the result of the technological affordance of smart-phones with front-facing cameras, which started with the release of the iPhone 4 in 2010. In addition, selfies are normatively oriented towards being shared into the personal networks of social media platforms, rather than solely being for the purposes of memorialization or witnessing (Gunthert, 2014). Research has to be attuned to the social and communicative aspects of selfies, not just their aesthetic and semiotic aspects[117]. These aspects are also key to their political impact.

The manner in which the selfies of prominent political leaders operate can be well instantiated with the much-discussed selfie (or 'ussie') taken by the then Danish Prime Minister Helle Thornberg-Schmidt, Barrack Obama and then PM of the UK David Cameron at a memorial service for Nelson Mandela's passing in 2013.

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[117] See Gómez Cruz, Edgar, and Helen Thornham. 2015. Selfies Beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical) F(r)ictions of a Practice. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 7 (1): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v7.28073.

Fig. 1: 'Ussie'

Source: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/10/nelson-mandela-world-leaders-selfie

The image was followed by some amount of furore in the Western media, and the racial and gendered aspects of this furore point towards the political implications of these images, especially in times of personalized politics (Miltner and Baym, 2015). Some of the media coverage had their noses turned up at the apparent 'frivolity' of leaders that engage in such behaviour, at a memorial service for a figure such as Mandela no less. There was a longing for a more 'gravitas'-laden performance of leadership, seen in the statesman-like Roosevelt, among others. The appraisal also focused on Obama's African-American heritage, establishing a causal link between his smile and posing to old tropes of infantalization of African-Americans. Michelle Obama was painted as a disapproving, angry Black woman, another well-worn trope. Thornberg-Schmidt on the other hand, was written of in highly sexualized language, with commentary on her physical looks and choice in clothing. The insinuation, clearly, was of an illicit relationship between Obama and Thornberg-Schmidt, an old paranoiac racist fantasy of sexual relations between men-of-colour and white women.

Such adverse reactions to a selfie by heads of states is hardly surprising, given the popular attitudes towards selfies (Senft and Baym, 2015). Selfies have been associated with narcissism, especially of the young and technologically adept generation, steeped in the alleged self-centred values of 'me!' (Eckel et al., 2018). Though originally more a reserve of celebrities and notables, young girls especially have been considered to be the prime purveyors of this visual trend. The inferential logic at play seemed to be that selfies are a sign of vanity in young women obsessed with their looks, and this led to predictable media-fuelled 'moral panics'. Along with narcissism, selfies and their takers had negative connotations associated with them such as psychosis, body dysmorphia etc. the scholarship on the phenomenon of selfies has not been too hasty in chiming in with this pathologization, and has actively resisted this characterization (Senft and Baym, 2015). Often arguing from a feminist standpoint, scholars of internet studies, media studies, sociologists and others have fore-grounded the agency and power wielded by these practices of capturing the self through visual means especially by young women. These practices were linked to styles of

self-documentation engaged in by women in the West from the early-modern era, which often used visual means.

 In public spheres which were normatively masculine these were ways of participation for women, racial and sexual minorities (Miltner and Baym, 2015). Jeffrey Alexander has pointed out that because leaders tend to serve as receptacles that carry the symbolic aspirations of people. However, not everyone gets to serve in such representational roles; 'extra-civil repressions' prevent some people from fulfilling such roles. The treatment received by Obama and the Danish Prime Minister clicking a selfie is, thus, not surprising[118]. In the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere (of the 19th century coffee houses and salons) that had come to serve as the template textual and rational thought was considered as the ideal mode of inter-subjective debate. Habermas considered the deluge of visual content in mass media to have a detrimental effect on the public sphere, which delegitimizes popular modes of participation. The normative judgements are of 'shamelessness' and exhibitionism by practices of self-documenting through visual documenting of women[119].

Scholars such as Elizabeth Losh[120] and Jill Rettberg[121] have since then argued that selfies are a form of negotiation with structures of power, and has the potential to be both liberating and establishing new forms of control. They explain how taking a selfie and posting it on social media platforms was a practice of 'self-making' that negotiated with and questioned the public-private distinction, the commodification[122] of our very private lives by contemporary capitalism and structures that determined what kind of bodies and gestures are considered to be 'appropriate', acceptable and desirable in public and as a form of public conversation and discourse, especially with regard to gender and sexuality.

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[118] See Alexander, J.C., 2010. *The performance of politics: Obama's victory and the democratic struggle for power*. Oxford University Press.

[119] See Senft, T.M., 2012. Hating Habermas: On exhibitionism, shame, & life on the actually existing internet (http://eitherand.org/exhibitionism/hating-habermas-exhibitionism-shame-life-actually-/). Theresa Senft was one of the earliest scholars to interrogate the devaluation of visual self-representation by young women. During her research into cam-girls she herself participated by working as one of them. See Senft, T.M., 2008. *Camgirls: Celebrity and community in the age of social networks* (Vol. 4). Peter Lang

[120] See Losh, E., 2015. Selfies| Feminism Reads Big Data:" Social Physics," Atomism, and Selfiecity. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, p.13.

[121] See https://jilltxt.net/?p=3843

[122] See http://text-relations.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-young-girl-and-selfie.html

1b #selfieswithModi

India's Prime Minister had also received some amount of disapproval for one of his selfies, including official censure from the Election Commission of India. During the pivotal Lok Sabha elections of 2014, Modi had taken a selfie outside the voting booth after casting his vote holding a cardboard lotus in his hands, which is the symbol of the BJP. This flouted the code of conduct in effect during elections, and led to an FIR report being filed against him, while the Election Commission sent him a notice.

Fig. 2: Modi's selfie

Source: https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/461365704147480576?lang=en

Modi also utilized this opportunity to mobilise Twitter followers through his selfie, by asking them to take selfies after voting while holding up the finger stained by ink to indicate that they had voted. The images were to be posted with the hashtag #selfiewithModi.

Fig. 3: #SelfieWithModi

Source: https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/461366549115179008

vimgothwal @vijay_gothwal · Apr 30, 2014
@monicanitin @narendramodi

Fig. 4: Selfie after voting

Source: https://twitter.com/vijay_gothwal/status/461376712832323586

Selfies with world leaders are also employed to transmit a sense of engaging in the demanding task of state-craft and diplomacy while cultivating close personal ties with powerful foreign politicians. The implication of these selfies is that India is being given its due as a global player of weight, while such bilateral and multi-lateral ties would lead to economic growth and opportunities. One such selfie was tweeted by Australian PM Scott Morrison at the G20 Summit held in Osaka with the text caption in Hindi saying – 'Kithana accha hai Modi'. Gestures such as these can easily be interpreted as the courting of the India PM by the leader of a developed nation. Modi responded with a re-tweet which used the colloquial Australian expression 'mate' in a display of reciprocal bonhomie[123].

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[123] See https://www.livemint.com/news/india/australian-pm-morrison-tweets-a-selfie-with-pm-narendra-modi-says-kithana-acha-he-modi-1561800377885.html

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Fig. 5: Modi-Morrison selfie

Source: https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1144822260319920128?lang=en

This is not the only selfie with an Australian Prime Minister of PM Modi.
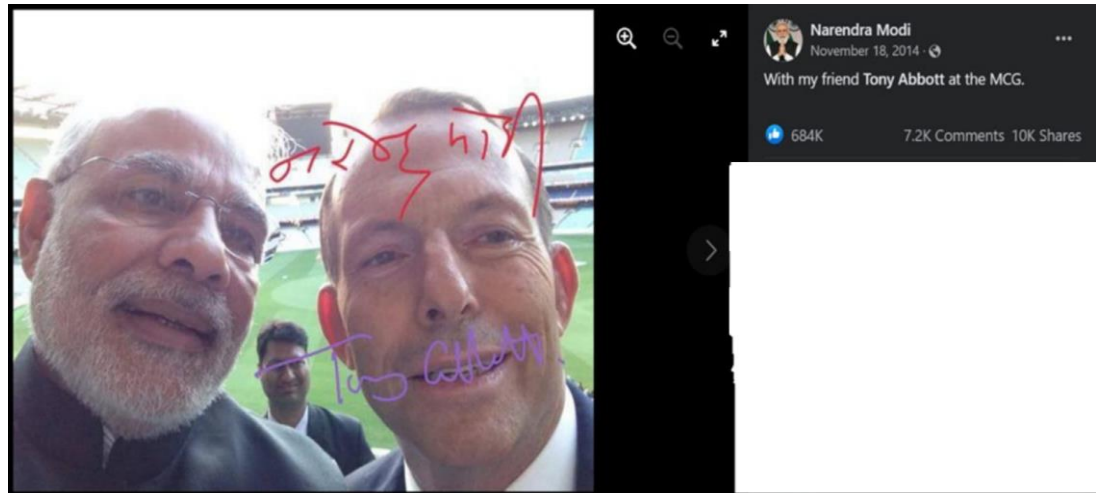
Fig. 6: Modi with then Australian PM Abbott at the Melbourne Cricket Ground

The PM has also had selfies with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, among others.

Fig. 7 The PM with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang

1c Arvind Kejriwal

Rahul Gandhi and Kejriwal have not deployed selfies for outreach, networking or mobilisation. However, they have both used first-person, intimate, close-up video messages very similar selfies to get their message across. Kejriwal used it during his campaign for the 2020 Delhi elections as a promotional interactive video for his campaign which featured ringing the doorbell of a prospective voter (which is the standpoint of the viewer). It was shared on Twitter but the interactive experience was available on

www.welcomekejriwal.com which was created for the Delhi 2020 campaign. The video begins with a ring of a calling bell and the first shot is of Kejriwal with folded hands introducing himself and asking for permission to enter the home of the voter, presumably through the peeping hole. The backdrop is of a well-maintained garden and a spacious verandah, indicating an upper-middle class house-hold. Upon being granted entry there were a list of options (such as water, infrastructure etc.) on which Kejriwal delivers a pre-recorded lecture, elaborating on the achievements of his government in the particular sector. The website is no longer operational but the tweet and the video as an attachment is still available. On Kejriwal's Instagram official handle the video has had over 85,500 views.

Fig. 8: Kejriwal at doorstep

Source:

https://twitter.com/ArvindKejriwal/status/1221708894826827777?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1221708894826827777%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.firstpost.com%2Fpolitics%2Fdelhi-

1d Rahul Gandhi

Rahul Gandhi has also started providing followers with such an intimate, up-close viewing experience in his videos in 2020, after the pandemic, on Instagram. The change is evident between the Diwali greeting in 2014 in Fig. 9 and this message in Fig. 10 regarding the farmers' protests in November 2020, which possesses the distinct marks of a 'self-made' message.

Fig. 9: Rahul Gandhi in 2014   Fig. 10: Rahul Gandhi in 2020

Rahul Gandhi has only one distinct celebrity selfie, with Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey on Instagram. The fact that this is a selfie becomes evident through some distinct visual signs in the image.
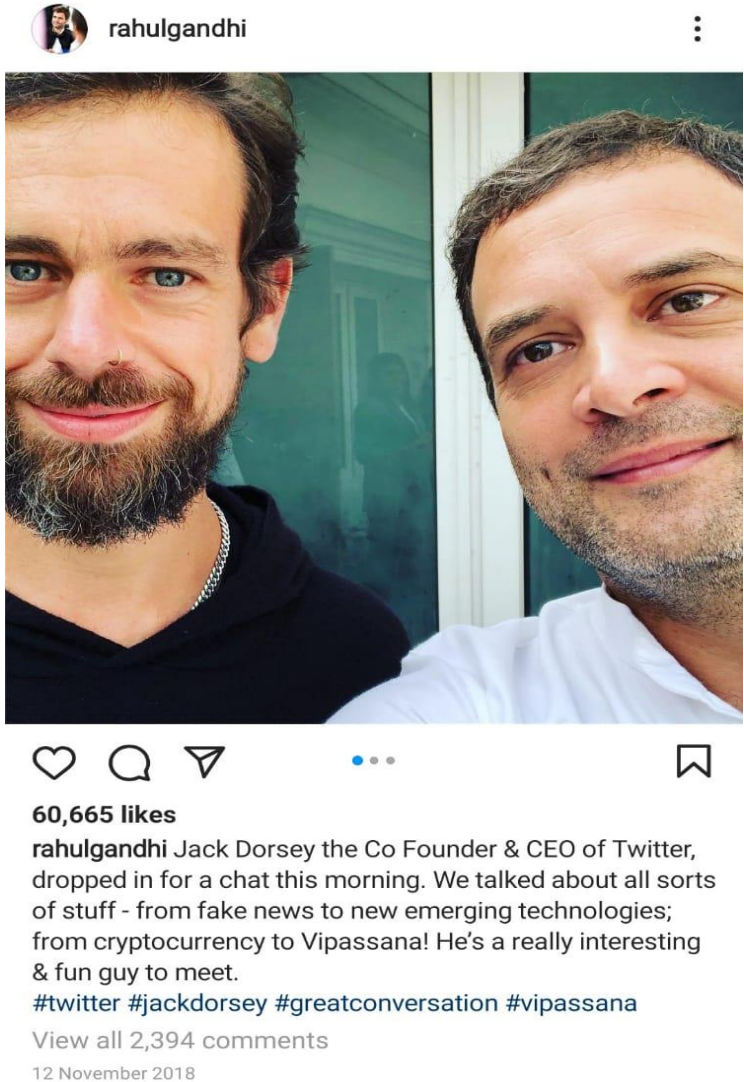

Fig. 11

Source: Instagram

Selfies of political leaders can also be easily re-purposed for lampooning them, which can start memetic trends.

1e Specificities of the 'self-made' image

What would lead one to differentiate between image Fig. 9 and Fig. 10 (both featuring Rahul Gandhi)? Indeed, it begs the question what is it that demarcates Fig. 1 – 11 as selfies (barring Fig. 9). Answering the questions this research poses would require one to begin at this fundamental point. The entanglements of digital self-presentation through visual means, populism, the leader evoking and inscribing the 'people' and being a corporeal representation of them – these issues would be taken forward through a discussion of the selfies posited thus far.

Certain bodily gestures become immediately apparent upon inspection of these selfies which seem to signify that one is indeed looking into a selfie. The outstretched arm, which is partially visible, is perhaps the most conspicuous. The very intimate and close-up positioning of the torso/body is perhaps another. It could be argued that a particular sensibility is being conveyed, one that with the experience of seeing numerous instances of the selfie (some mundane, some 'iconic' such as those of PM Modi) one begins to intuitively grasp. This significance, however, might slip the more commonplace definitions one comes across. The Oxford Dictionary, which declared the term 'selfie' to be the 'Word of the Year' for 2013, provides a rather succinct definition of selfies:

> 'A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media'[124]

As the definition suggests, selfies tend to be quite self-referential. It captures a certain self, that unique feature of an individual that is one of the hallmarks of modernity. This image is not the same as taken in other photographs, which involves a second entity taking the photograph. The gaze of the photographer is turned inwards towards oneself, instead of towards another entity (hence, the accusations of narcissism, or almost a voyeurism of the self) (Eckel et al., 2018). The stand-points of the photographer taker seems to coincide with the position of the subject. The power dynamics wherein the photographer remains absent, and the subject is revealed and performs for the photographer's gaze no longer remains the

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[124] See https://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/19/living/selfie-word-of-the-year/index.html#:~:text=Oxford%20Dictionaries'%20word%20for%20the,for%202013%20is%20%E2%80%9Cselfie.%E2%80%9D&text=Oxford%20says%20that%20doesn't,to%20a%20social%20media%20website.%E2%80%9D

same. Indeed, the scholarship on selfies strongly contends with the tradition of twentieth century thought on visuality and the gaze (Frosh, 2015). Ground-breaking work by theorists[125] had focussed on the gendered, masculine gaze of photography, scopophilia, the propensity to judge and evaluate through surveillance etc. Selfies, however, seem to upend these power dynamics between the photographer and the subject to a certain extent, allowing the subject to engage in auto-poesis and self-documentation (Eckel et al. 2018).

1f The 'self-made' intimacy

For populist leaders of various hues, or to political leaders in a largely populist polity, it is evident how these characteristics of selfies would seem attractive. Instead of press photographers from the media or a designated one, selfies allow these leaders to have considerable control over who has control over the portrayal of the figure of the leader. In addition, populist leaders thrive on the distrust of the 'mainstream' media 'elites' with whom they usually share an adversarial relationship (Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017). The 'self-generated' impression generated by selfies is also quite in tune with the image of the 'self-made' politician, who has made it into the field of politics through their own merit and hard-work, with no help from the political establishment or 'elites' (indeed, the political 'elites' are arrayed against the populist leader, often conspiratorially) (Engesser, Fawzi, et al., 2017). The sensation of intimacy generated by selfies also aids in the leader establishing seemingly direct, proximal connections with followers, unhindered by mediation or 'middle-men' of any kind (Alexander, 2006).

These selfies also break down the earlier distinctions between public and private (Lasén and Gómez-Cruz, 2009), and the consequent feeling of closeness a viewer feels seems almost to be an invitation to join the populist leader in their intimate sphere. This lends an aura of accessibility to the leader, that the leader is truly one of the 'people', an 'every-man' or common man. The outstretched arm that usually informs us of the 'selfiness' of a selfie indicates a certain 'sociability' – it lets the viewer into the secret of the artifice involved in the act of capturing the image. It lets the viewer join the image-taker in viewing the subject

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[125] See Crary, J. (1992). *Techniques of the observer: On vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press., Jay, M. (1988). Scopic regimes of modernity. In H. Foster (Ed.), *Vision and visuality* (pp. 3–23). Seattle, WA: Bay Press and Mulvey, L., 1989. Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In *Visual and other pleasures* (pp. 14-26). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

together (Frosh, 2015). This is a strategic move seen more and more, especially with celebrities (and elites) too as they try to prove their ordinariness behind their star-studded lives by engaging in tasks considered to be engaged in by common people. Whereas visual aesthetic norms were decided by elites and celebrities in a bygone era, they are determined by the practices of ordinary digital users nowadays. The transmission of aesthetic norms has been reversed, as the practices of ordinary users are now available for inspection and appropriation through social media platforms (Gunthert, 2014).

This artifice remained invisible in earlier images of leaders; through this revelation a sense of empowerment is dispensed to the citizen. This is a highlight not only of contemporary[126] visuality and scopophilia but also the contemporary hyper-mediated public sphere - to illuminate that which remained in the dark earlier. There has been a shift from the 'passion for privacy' to 'empowering exhibitionism' (Lasén and Gómez-Cruz, 2009). This drive to surveil is drawn to the digital spectacle on display[127](McQuire, 2008). But unlike what Jeffrey Alexander had posited, the revealing of the artifice does not weaken the 'performance' of leadership but creates 'transparency' and creates seemingly unmediated contact between the leader and the follower (Alexander, 2006). Or perhaps, as we shall investigate, the mediation has moved to another register altogether. These selfies are not merely representational; they are also exercises in performances of power.

Rahul Gandhi's Instagram video of his pet dog 'Pidi' doing tricks and eating a biscuit extends this feeling of intimacy, giving a glimpse into the inner lives of one of India's premier political families.

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[126] Privacy or the veiled, shielded private sphere which was zealously protected was the obverse of the Habermasian public sphere.

[127] Soviet flat 'as a communal apartment of Stalin era: no privacy, everybody spies on everybody else, always present line for common areas such as the toilet or the kitchen' Manovic, L. (1996) 'On totalitarian interactivity', *Rhizome Digest*, October.

Fig. 12

It also led to some amount of backfire, as it was seized upon by the Congress's opponents to further mock him and the party in electronic media. This was done especially functionaries of the BJP. Their combative spokes-person Sambit Patra seized upon it and used it to mock both Gandhi and the party in public.[128]

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[128] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lq7tItvTuZc
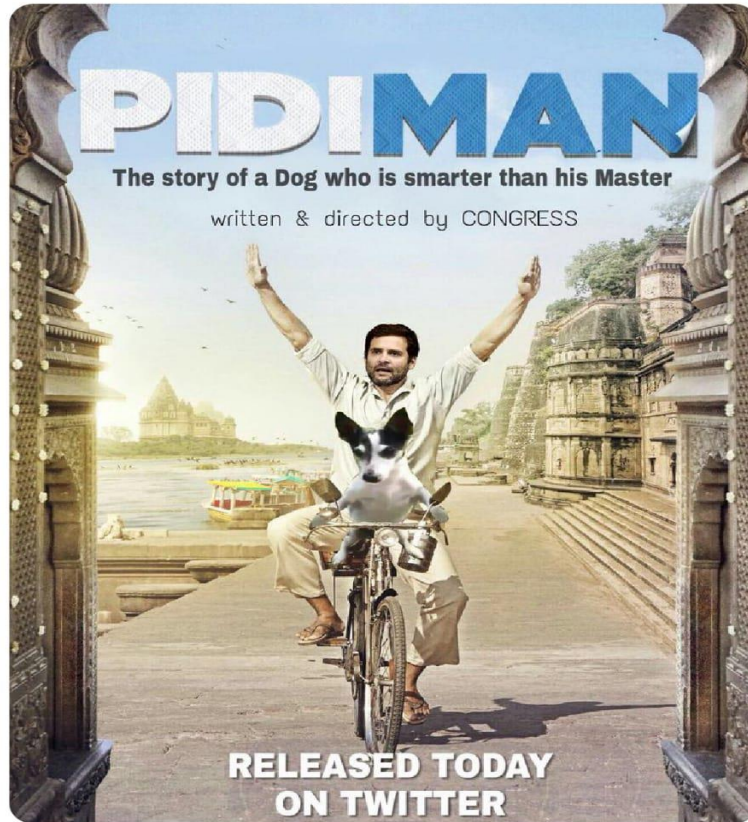
Fig. 13

Source: https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/924618205959741440/photo/1

2 'Liveness': Being-there, transparency and empowerment

The broadcast (to use a slightly dated term) of a selfie carries with it a certain 'liveness'; photographs used to serve the purpose of being artifices of 'memory', bearer of a sense of 'then' and 'now', but no more. As Frosh argues, selfies instead convey a sense of 'there' and 'here' to its audience, with the audience often being invited to a 'being there' with the selfie-taker. This 'being there', it must be borne in mind, is made possible by the corporeal

presence of the leader, the representation of the people. Selfies have a relentlessly deictic function; they are relentlessly self-referential, almost as though they have a finger pointing towards the photographer-subject (Frosh, 2015). This is where we notice a departure from the qualities of any other selfie as compared to that of the leader; the followers too feel included in this reference to the figure of the leader. The selfie, after all, is not merely pointing to a certain object. Inherent to the selfie is the message – 'see me showing you'. The leader is taking the viewer-follower along for the task of 'bearing witness' to events (Koliska and Roberts, 2015). In figures 5-7 the follower is being offered presence at scenes of power such as meeting heads of state and important lynchpins of Silicon Valley. In figure 11 Rahul Gandhi is 'pressing flesh' (as Americans call it, the act of meeting and shaking hands with the gentry as well as notables on the election campaign trail by a politician) with the CEO of Twitter.

A feeling of authenticity is generated by selfies, especially those that have a political tint, as the selfie-taker seems to be bearing witness to events that are unfolding. The visibility of face(s) and bodi(es) serve as markers of truth-telling (Lobinger and Brantner, 2015). Photography has long served as a 'certificate of presence' in such situations, as seen in this recent selfie-video, where a dance-fitness instructor carried on with her regimen as Myanmar's coup unfolded behind her[129]:

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[129] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/02/exercise-instructor-appears-to-unwittingly-capture-myanmar-coup-in-dance-video
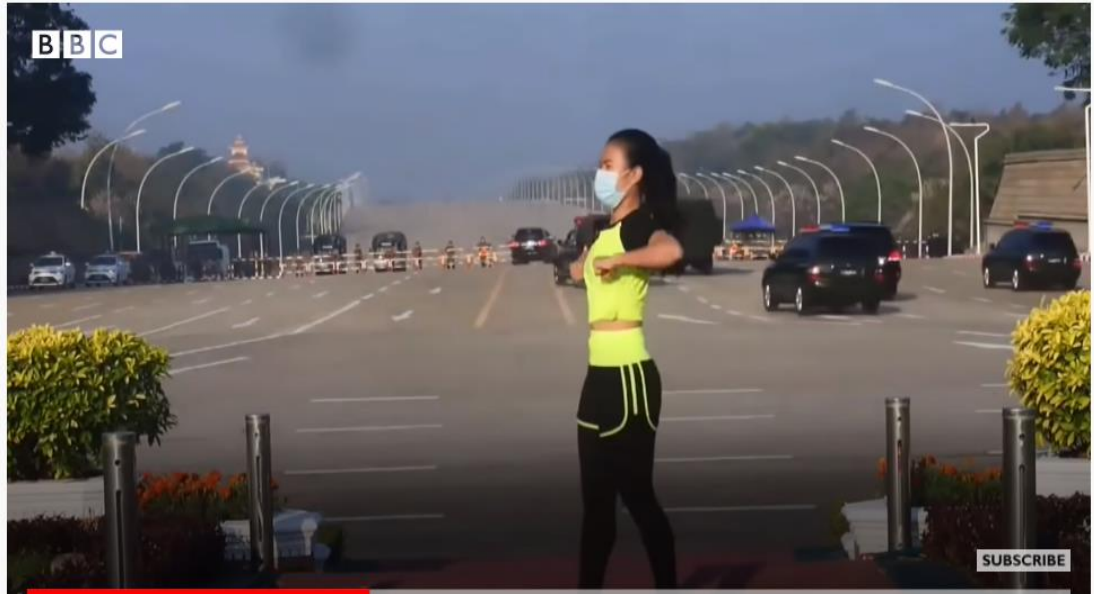
Fig. 14: Khing Hnin Wai

Source: BBC News[130]

Television broadcast of news and events of political importance was once the epitome of 'liveness'. However, the coming of new ICTs has changed that entirely. This was especially seen in the case of reality TV shows, as the lives and actions of the participants were first beheld on TV and simultaneously feverish discussions were carried out online. Media events such as disasters have been broadcast for a few decades now over cable news networks in real time as they unfolded, creating the sense of immediacy and closeness mentioned above. Social media platforms let viewers to testify to their 'bearing witness' of these events. As these events remain 'open-ended'[131] i.e. open to interpretation during their unfolding, this enlarges the scope of participation through social media platforms. This participation carries with it the sense of agentic responsibility to take part in the occurrence of history, and no longer just passive viewers, thus leading to some manner of democratic 'good'. And when such mediated content about events of political nature come from a 'friend' in one's social network online it has more of an impact compared to a news item. Political mobilisations based on selfies cashes in on this sense of affinity created by taking part in activities that

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[130] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEHiTjViicE

[131] See S. Kumar, 'The fatal snare of proximity: live television, new media and the witnessing of Mumbai attacks', in: South Asian history and culture, 3, vol. 4, 2012.

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one's extended network is involved in, in response to a call or an event that seems to be directed to oneself and others like oneself in one's network (Hammelburg, 2015).

Now, however, the function has expanded to include communication and very importantly for this research, identity formation (van Dijck, 2013). Political selfies serve also as narrative devices with details from the lives of political leaders woven in that this lends it the added touch of authenticity, which are then shared in the context-collapsed[132] ecology of social media platforms. The candour associated with the production of the selfie, in the bodily gestures that indicate a selfie, highlights the 'the dimension of self-reflective artifice, the stance toward representation as such' (Bellinger, 2015). This adds to the overall perception of authenticity.

Politicians cannot afford to reveal the entire artifice or background infrastructure that is at work in the image they project, or the cynicism this would evoke would be too great a backlash. They occupy a particularly contradictory space, where they can take advantage of the celebritization of political leadership, yet have a certain degree of disavowal when it comes to the machinery producing this celebrity status[133]. The end result is a singular feeling of intimacy being generated that is very different from the celebrity-hood enjoyed by those in other spheres of cultural production. The selfies with celebrities can be seen as attempts to encash on the popularity networks of each other.

The reaction to the Obama selfie/ussie was a delayed reaction to this celebritization. Obama was always already a 'star' and his electoral campaign, irrespective of whether the media considered it agreeable or not. He was no stranger to rubbing shoulders with fellow celebrities. His celebrityhood had also a lot to do with his rhetorical style and presentation, which evoked long-standing American myths. He was not the angry Black man, but a polished and sophisticated Black President who had an almost messianic halo, who had set about the task of healing the long-standing racial animus in the US (Coladonato, 2014).

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[132] See Marwick, A.E. and Boyd, D., 2011. I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New media & society*, *13*(1), pp.114-133.
[133] See J. Stanyer, *Intimate Politics: Publicity, Privacy and the Personal Lives of Politicians in Media Saturated Democracies*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

3 Selfies and sharing

However, as has been discussed in brief earlier (through Losh and Rettberg), to embark upon the exercise of taking a selfie is to enter a network of power that provides affordances on one hand and disciplines on the other. The aesthetic considerations of selfies are governed (and often overridden) by the demands of being shared into a network of connected citizens. The dissemination into networks is, in fact, the very *raison d'etre* of selfies. The corporeal form of not only common citizens but also of politicians must remain within the confines of the gestural schema that indicates a selfie. For David Rubenstein this 'shareability' remains the inextricable part of selfies. The process of taking a selfie - running it through beautifying 'filters' and uploading/sharing it – seems one seamless process[134]. And, of course, especially for as prominent a figure as a populist political leader, it never suffices to have one selfie but a series of them from which the best is chosen (Eckel et al., 2018). This focus on the selfie's communicative and social media messaging potential has been called the victory of 'use over content' by some scholars. Being attentive towards selfies as cultural artifacts and the selfie as a social practice is an approach that best serves the objectives of this research[135].

This social-communicative aspect can also be detected in the structural composition of selfies. The components of the selfie image are also the means to enact a social relation between the leader and the follower. Each selfie carries with it an idea, and a certain manner in which the various components are arranged to convey the message. Kress and van Leuwen call these the 'ideational' and 'textual' aspects of the image (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2020). However, there is also the more interactive aspect that develops intersubjectively. As discussed above, the selfies of Modi carry with them a certain idea of robust leadership involved in the rough and tumble of international relations, strategic politics vis-à-vis allies, opposition, corporate sector etc (that is usually valorized as *kutniti* by his supporters). The genre conventions that have to be adhered to for the image to qualify as a selfie are also a part of this compositional structure. However, social media platforms being a participatory medium there are certain 'social propositions' embedded in these

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[134] See Rubinstein, Daniel. 2015. Gift of the Selfie. In *Ego Update: The Future of Digital Identity*, ed. Alain Bieber, 163–175. Düsseldorf: NRW-Forum.

[135] See Gómez Cruz, Edgar, and Helen Thornham. 2015. Selfies Beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical) F(r)ictions of a Practice. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 7 (1): 1–10.

selfies that aid in this participation (Zhao and Zappavigna, 2018). These are the perspectival aspects of the image; what the viewer of the selfie sees is the perspective of the leader, who is the photographer, on a technologically mediated representation of the self. This is the relationship the leader imagines of themselves with respect to the representation of themselves and shares with their followers. This approach has been used to posit a different understanding for the youthful enthusiasm of supporters and followers of political leaders. The Indian PM's followers are enthusiastic in taking selfies with their favoured political leader as well:

Fig.15:

Source: https://twitter.com/dkgdelhi/status/461370783562874880

Rahul Gandhi, similarly, has also taken part in selfies taken by ordinary citizens.

Fig. 16

Fig. 17

4 Intimacy and Official images

The discussion in this chapter deals heavily with intimacy, and opens up new avenues for understanding this as the definitions of private and public get re-shaped. This also begs the question regarding how intimacy is generated in non-selfie official images that had been generated in the previous chapter. When it comes to non-selfie images of politicians, Bellinger notices two strategies used to avoid any dissonance between the image and the

textual caption accompanying it on social media platforms. The first is to put the textual caption in the third person i.e. in the past, as is seen in these images of the PM:

Fig. 18

Source: Instagram

Fig. 19

Source: Instagram

If this is not done, such images which are not selfies, face the predicament of not possessing the same efficacy as selfies – that sense of immediacy, intimacy and affinity that has been

extensively discussed thus far. After all, if the present continuous sense is used, the PM wouldn't be able to type a caption and take selfies at the same time. This dissonance is seen in this post:

Fig. 20

Source: Instagram

The second strategy is to remove the speaking subject from the text altogether, as seen here:
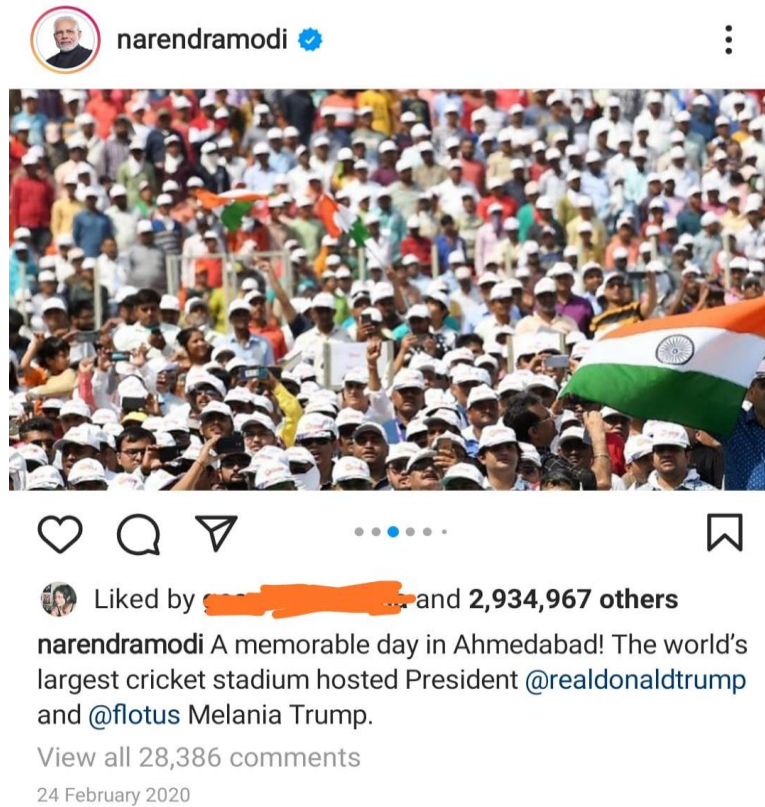
Fig. 21

Source: Instagram

5 Regional politicians

Regional politicians who have a lot of prominence and are media-savvy also have similar online presence, drawing from the populist playbook and appealing to the 'people' against an 'other'. They also display a remarkable amount of self-awareness regarding their visual presence on mass media and social media platforms often lead to memes (which has the potential to enhance their popularity and ingratiate them further to audiences). The current Chief Minister of Assam Himanta Bishwa Sharma stated in a interview during the campaign for the Assam state legislative election of early 2021 that he did not intend to ride on the roof of a vehicle during campaigns in a spectacular manner to become fuel of meme. With good humour he adds that he supports the creativity of youngsters and doesn't mind them making memes of him.

Fig. 22

Source: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CLgQNMJAxMB/?igshid=6958vrraotad
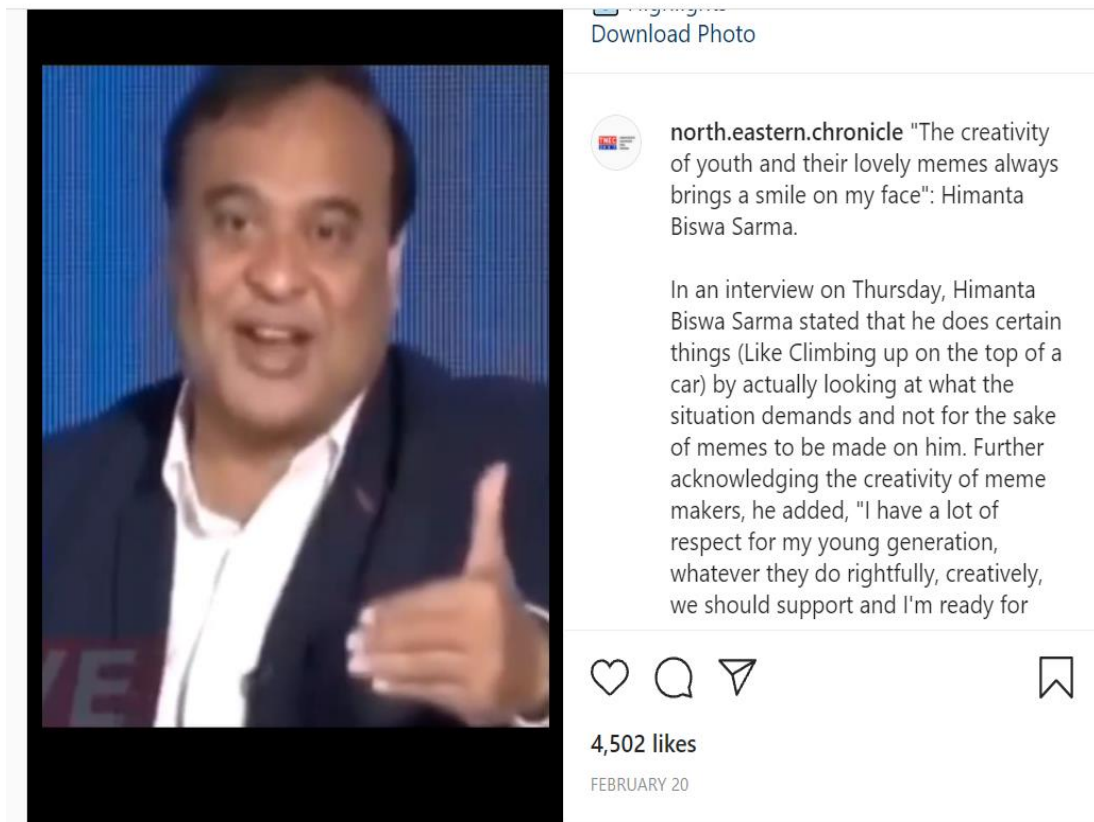
In the next chapter we shall delve into the user-generated images i.e. memes of the three political leaders.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, politicians exploit several dynamic aspects of selfies to establish a feeling of closeness and give them a peek 'behind the scenes' of their performative selves. We can gauge the importance attached to selfies by the section towards the end that discusses the tactics available to overcome the limitations of intimacy generated by official non-selfie images. There are no photographers as obstacles between the leader and the people, which also signals a certain 'authenticity'. The gestural politics of selfies open a new dimension in the corporeal iconography associated with political leaders. The aspect of 'see me showing you' places the user/viewer at the same location as the leader's

eyes, further integrating the user/viewer into the new *body politic* with the leader as the head. The follower views important and banal events through this ocular affordance provided by the leader, increasing the one-ness with the leader. But each user is addressed as an individual being invited by the leader to share in his vision, not just a nameless figure in a mass of followers. The user as a vital, useful node in the network can further transmit the leader's selfies, or may partake in the practice themselves. This must be read in conjunction with the last two concluding sections of the previous chapter.

The perspective offered by the selfie of political leaders such as the PM here can be considered 'social propositions' (as discussed above in this chapter) – for instance, forging close, important relationships with foreign heads of state for the betterment of the nation and establishing the nation's clout at the world stage, or a leader representing India being of global importance rubbing shoulders with other powerful leaders. This can be read along the lines of the 'offer' images that Kress and van Leeuwen classify as a separate category of photographic self-portraiture. For Kress and Van Leeuwen when the leader is meeting the gaze of the viewer directly, it is usually a 'demand' image – something is demanded by the leader in the image, such as loyalty, patriotism etc. However, the gestural politics of the selfie makes possible some very different dynamics to come into play. These gestures serve as visual cues pointing not just towards the leader's self but also their perspective. The leader's perspective is on 'offer' for the follower to adopt. Of course, the viewer may use different hermeneutic pathways to engage with the pictorial figure of the leader, and associate negative qualities with these selfies, such as vanity and triviality. However, much as Stuart Hall had argued in the case of newspaper images of politicians, the much-vaunted 'interactivity' afforded to users that is associated with Web 2.0 forms such as social media platforms is circumscribed by the dominant 'sewing' signified that holds meaning down, and prevents an endless proliferation of meaning[136].

While in the previous chapter we see how the modern politician uses the referential and deictic functions of images to plug into historical-cultural archives to generate affective attachment, here we see that these functions of images have been intensified considerably. The self-

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[136] See Hall, S. (1982) 'The determination of news photographs', in Cohen, S. and Young, J. (ed.) *The Manufacture of News*, London: Constable

referential and connotative excesses of images are constantly solidifying the role of the political leader as the central locus in politics. This excess spills over into the networks for which they are produced (to be transmitted). The spatial feeling of 'being there' generated by selfies has been likened to the 'liveness' of 'breaking news', and we can well see why. This is a gestural politics in which the follower can partake in the *body politic* by simulating the inviting, intimate gesture of the politician. The 'people' find a tangibility and are palpable in the images of crowds milling around the politician in a rally, and this has been the case since before the internet. But selfies intensify this affect of 'us', as this recognition by users/followers of 'me and others like me' can also be found in the self-gaze of the leader in the selfies. Through this gesture, which doubles the leader's gaze towards their own selves and their perspective (to be shared online), the 'people' are palpable as a 'people' to themselves, sharing the very ocular faculties of the leader through their individual screens. Here, again, we see how the performance of a technocrat exemplar - signalling through technology adoption for the sake of 'transparency' and 'clean governance' shorn of red-tape and rent-seeking - has the potential to dovetail into a populist style performance (a lack of mediating hurdles between the leader and the follower and direct, personalized, potent governance).

CHAPTER IV

IMAGE POLITICS II: MEMES, HISTORY AND IDENTITY

This chapter investigates the second set of data that is a part of this doctoral research – memes created of the political leaders under discussion from their official images and press photos. The chapter begins with a detailed discussion of the methodology used to collect the data in this chapter. It looks into how the coding and filtering of the data initially collected was done to arrive at the sample of memes discussed in this chapter. Along with the investigation of the memes, the chapter looks into how these memes have been used as a part of the performative production of identity, social and political, in India. This discussion also looks at how sectarian political and identity-based issues found on social media platforms that reflect offline cleavages play out. To facilitate this, the chapter looks at the hegemonic influences of a certain demographic imagination, as well as the structural processes, such as inter-textuality, that bleeds over the overarching influence of popular culture and folklore/mythology into these memes.

1 Methodology

The means used for collection of data in the study of memes has evolved in the course of the last decade. Some researchers have utilised search engines such as Google to search for particular iteration of memes by entering thematic keywords. Along with that, some of them have also looked at the metrics provided by Google such as Google Trends data on the keywords data, thereby providing a glimpse of the popularity of certain meme components over a specific period of time (Aharoni, 2019) (Campbell *et al.*, 2018). It is a common practice for scholars to cross-reference their data with online archives and encyclopaedia of memes, such as knowyourmeme.com[137]. These methodologies are in consonance with the evolving ideas of Rogers who had prescribed fresh approaches to study phenomena that straddle the offline and online realms using 'natively digital' artifacts (Rogers, 2015).

The extant scholarship has also conducted platform-specific research. Facebook, Twitter and Reddit are the major platforms for such studies (Bellar *et al.*, 2013). Instagram has also emerged as an important platform to be studied, as it is devoted entirely to hosting images of its users. Its user base has also significantly increased over the past few years

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[137] https://knowyourmeme.com/

(DeCook, 2018) (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020). These platforms are especially useful when researching the ecosystem that develops around memetic cultures, especially those that deal with topics such as religious and national belonging. The platforms also offer data such as 'likes', 'shares', 'comments', 're-tweets', 'quote tweets' associated with a particular content etc. One can also study the discursive coalescence around particular themes and ideologies. For instance, one might easily find memes on far-right ideological grounds from both the Global North and South as well as the reaction and discussions around them on these pages (Guenther *et al.*, 2020) (Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo, 2021). Scholars have also researched such social media pages with more emancipatory leanings such as those by indigenous peoples pushing back against the erasure of their history (Frazer and Carlson, 2017). This research has advanced the understanding of how political and religious sectarian identity-formation takes place through these political Facebook pages, how contemporary political events are framed towards this end, how the news is interpreted etc. (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson, 2016)

For this study we have manually filtered the data along the lines of the central research questions of this thesis. Singular insights can be gained through manual filtering and analysis. Keeping in mind the objectives of this research, the data for this paper was collected through manual examination of memes on certain Facebook pages and one Twitter handle. A sample was selected purposively. We have already discussed the rationale behind selecting the sites of data collection in the expansive methodology section of the introductory chapter. From all 6 sites, the entirety of the visual content hosted by the 5 Facebook pages and the Twitter handle from a period stretching from their respective dates of inception to May of 2019 was manually examined one-by-one. I went through over thousands of images, some of them memetic to choose the ones featured in this chapter.

Certain categories emerged as important through prolonged study of the memetic content from the sites of data extraction. The most important step involved extracting memes along the lines of themes that were pertinent to the primary subject of this research – the images circulating online featuring the image of selected political leaders (in this case, user-generated). In the case of user-generated memes, a lot of the memes revolved around

questions of nationalism, masculinity, religiosity and belonging-ness to the nation. This is the 'content' of the memetic data that Shifman had defined as the 'ideas and ideologies conveyed' by a meme (Shifman 2014, 40). The compositional elements of these memes most frequently used form the second definitive characteristic of these memes for Shifman. This is the 'form' – 'the physical incarnation of memes, perceived by our senses' (Shifman 2014, 40).

2 Meme-ing official photographs: Battlefield of legacy and identity

As hinted in the introductory chapters, it appears upon examination that the official selfies and digital representations of the figures of the leaders are a fecund source mined by citizens to create memes. In the course of this investigation, we find popular hermeneutics in conflict, with some consistency in the semiotic and semantic resources. The decision to dip into the legacy of India's anti-colonial leadership idiom as a means to buttress one's public image is a prime location of such conflict between supporters and detractors of leaders. For instance:
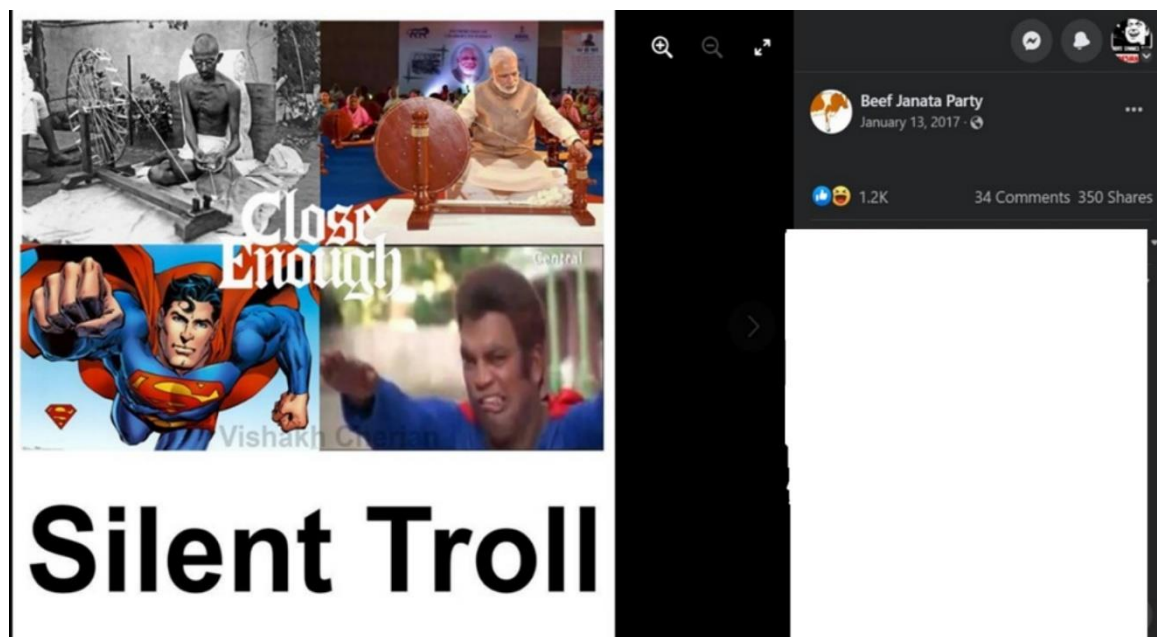
Fig. 1

Source: Beef Janata Party

The trope being followed in the meme in Fig. 1 is one of an obvious but failed mimicry, which leads to humour at the expense of the subject of the meme. Here, the PM's uptake of the saintly idiom through figural and artifactual representation faces mockery, as akin to being a parody of the comic-book character Superman. The still in the bottom right is of the Malayalam comedic actor Salim Kumar donning the trademark attire and cape of Superman in the movie 'CID Moosa' (2003). The original intent of the still was one of parodic allusion, of the buffoonish character played by Salim Kumar. However, even without the context of the movie, the message being delivered by the meme is obvious. Towards a similar end, Fig. 2 uses a sarcastic connotation by using the Einstein quote regarding Gandhi under a picture of the PM with a charkha, taken for the 2017 calendar of the Khadi board. The stance and the participation structure of the memes allow for those that did not approve of this mimicry of Gandhi by the PM to indulge in a sarcastic tone (Shifman, 2014, pp. 40–41).
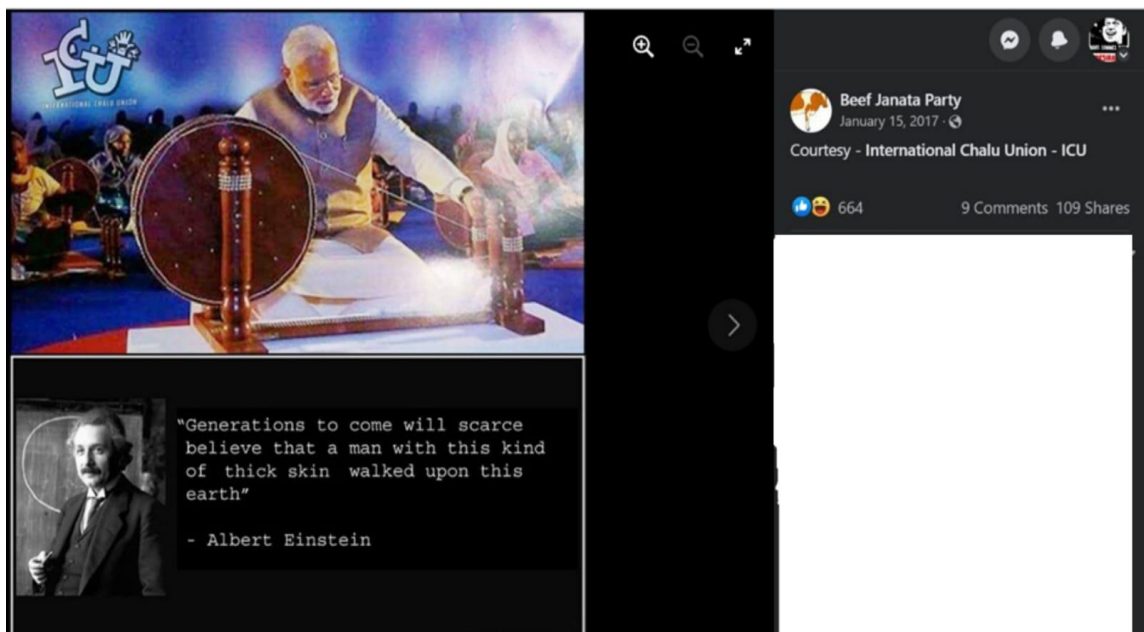
Fig. 2

Source: Beef Janata Party

We can unpack the essential ingredients to memetic humour in the memes Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 – 'superiority, incongruity and playfulness', as put forth by Shifman (Shifman, 2014). Through associational linkages and allusions encoded the reader of the meme is able to

comprehend that the object of ridicule here is the BJP and the right-wing. Overtly political memes often feature humour at the expense of opponents, and this tendency to poke fun at those not part of one's in-group is a part of a lot of other memes too. Superiority is often encoded with delegitimization of the subject.

However, the image of the PM with the charkha did not yield resources to his critics alone. Those who supported the PM questioned his lampooning, given the history of other public figures, including Congress Prime Ministers, in post-Independence India being pictured with the charkha. One of the images also has Kejriwal in it. Here we see a similar participatory structure as Fig. 3; the meme has a critical stance towards erstwhile Congress leaders and even Kejriwal, offered to those with similar views.

Fig. 3

Source: The Frustrated Indian Facebook page

As we examine the set of memes in this chapter, we shall see archives that serve as India's history being mobilised and weaponized time and time again, being made to speak to

present political expediencies. Sometimes it serves as evidence, sometimes to prove precedence, sometimes as a smear hurled at one's opponents. The communicative functions of meme are myriad, as Shifman had argued, from emotive to phatic to conative (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). There is a flavour of the expose in these memes, of revealing the truth in public. It also helps register one's intellectual/comedic superiority over one's adversaries in the public domain (Milner, 2016).

Official images from the leader's social media handles can serve to both legitimize and de-legitimize them, and sometimes this happens with the same image, showcasing the potential for skirmishes with interpretive resources.

Fig. 4

Source: The Frustrated Indian

Fig. 4, which has also been discussed in Chapter 2 and has been taken from the PM's official Twitter handle, is from the perspective of spectators witnessing the act. It is not in the critical vein like so many of the other memes discussed in this chapter. Here the audience has been made a part of the diegesis, an integral part witnessing an act of the PM

that is ostensibly meant to challenge typical hierarchies of India's caste and hierarchical social system. The components of the image have been so arranged so that the PM is at a lower height from the sanitation workers, who are looking down at him washing their feet. The participation structure and the diegesis is designed to invite anyone, including those indifferent to or critical of the PM, to be a part of a 'historical' act. The audience, or the 'people', is very much a part of the diegesis in memes such as this that promote or praise a leader (Srinivas, 2018). We will explore more such diegetic design in the subsequent sections.

The loaded significations of Fig. 4 (originally sourced from the PM's official Twitter handle) has already been discussed in Chapter 2 (Fig. 45 of Ch. 2). This meme accelerates these significations with an explicit gestural measure through the textual captions at the top and the bottom. The expected result is that of an audience/readership marvelling at the leader. There is a strong preponderance towards iconicity in the original official image, as well as the meme above. Even without the text caption, the image is sought to be imbued with something the 'exceeds words', an event of historical proportion. It mines into the structures of deeply-held beliefs and norms, and operationalizes them, lending it great political significance for the spectators and viewers (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). As discussed in Chapter 2 iconic images always have a cavernous cache of social meanings and significations under it surface. It brings some 'enchantment' in modern, secular processes of politics, which allows for emotional investment (Mazzarella, 2019).

But the same image could also fuel a meme that argues that this is a gesture that provides little beyond mere symbolism, while other leaders (by comparison) take measures that for the meme-makers constitute actual steps to ameliorate the conditions of sanitation workers engaged in manual scavenging. As van Leeuwen notes, comparisons 'almost always have a legitimatory or delegitimatory function' (Van Leeuwen, 2007). The PM has seemingly lost to the Kerala CM in moral evaluative terms. Fig. 5 seeks to provide more traction in the transmission of the image that the Prime Minister is engaging in a 'performance'/'drama' of challenging hierarchy rather than engaging in truly emancipatory politics, that there is a lack of 'authenticity.' Such a mode of critique has historic parallels in India's political history. As N. T. Ramarao (or NTR, his more popular

moniker), the political stalwart who founded the Telegu Desam Party of Andhra Pradesh and served as Chief Minister of the state, began to translate his cinematic career into a successful political career, his opponents derided him as 'Drama Rao' (Srinivas, 2018). Here, it seems the makers of the meme has sought to contain the excess of meaning and emotion that had been in the original image and video, circumscribing it with the sarcastic epithet (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). It throws a spanner into the works of emotional investment.

Fig. 5

Source: Beef Janata Party

3 Delegitimizing the opponent

3a Rahul Gandhi

The chief discursive onslaught against Rahul Gandhi has been that he is a dunce, a 'pappu', who is clueless and has held on to the reigns of the Congress party only by dint of his surname. The content and tone of the memes indicate that not only does his intellectual disability make him an object of mockery, it also leads to much consternation in senior leaders of his own party and allies. In Fig. 6 and Fig. 7, we see Sonia Gandhi, the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Arvind Kejriwal with their palms on their foreheads or on faces, a gesture that in many cultures is used to convey frustration or disbelief at the antics of someone. The words attributed to Rahul Gandhi are fictional; in

Fig. 6 he is shown as telling his mother Sonia Gandhi that his bank password is constituted by 'characters' such as Sibal (Kapil Sibal, Congress leader), Gulam (Gulam Nabi Azad, Congress leader) etc., a 'capital' and a 'special character' – Kejriwal. The meme engages in word-play, using a more colloquial meaning of the word 'character' connoting a bizarre or outlandish personality. Thus, the meme targets Kejriwal as well, as someone who is especially bizarre. The narrative is of an idiotic personality, a 'pappu' who cannot even comprehend the instructions to create a banking password.

Fig. 6

Source: The Frustrated Indian

In Fig. 7, Rahul Gandhi comes off as being narcissistic about his family in addition to being a 'pappu', as he allegedly seemed to have been under the impression that ISRO (Indian Space Research Organization) stood for 'Indira-Sanjay-Rajeev-Organization'. The meme subtly deploys a delegitimizing technique, by reminding the readers that the Congress governments of the past had a trend of naming public institutions, monuments, roadways etc. after their own leaders. This is a delegitimization in the register of authority and morality, with self-aggrandizement and lack of adequate intellectual acuity in a political leader (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Ross and Rivers, 2017).
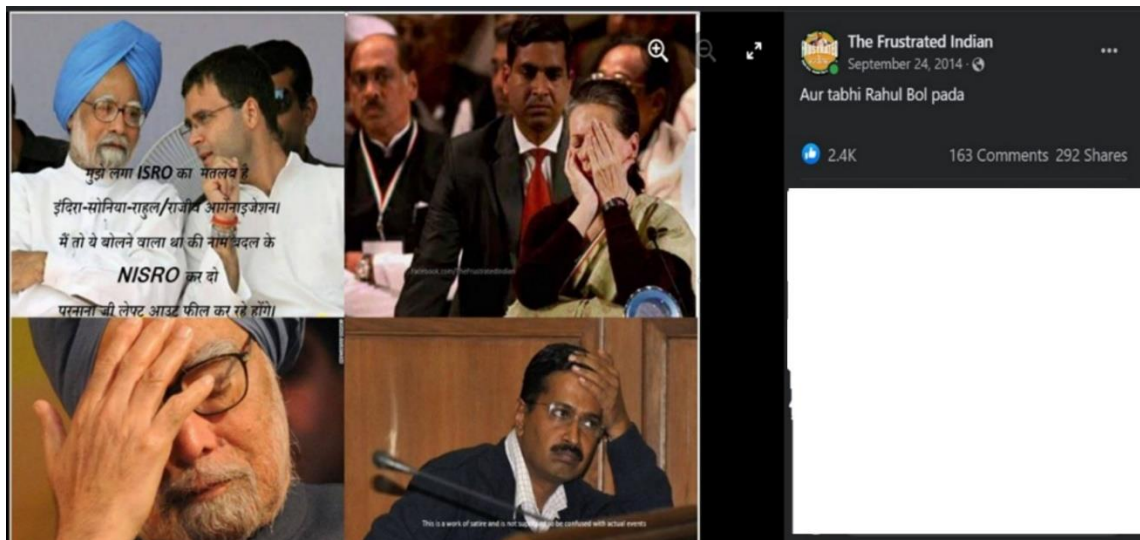
Fig. 7

Source: The Frustrated Indian

The fictive nature of these exchanges between Rahul Gandhi and others is indicative of the excesses often involved in the public narratives around Gandhi's figure. While he has had public gaffes and interviews where he decidedly comes off worse, often his words are taken out of context or morphed beyond recognition. For instance, Fig. 8 gives him the epithet Aloobali, a parody of the superhit Telegu movie 'Bahubali' (a literal translation is 'strongman'[138]). It alludes to a speech given by Gandhi in 2017, where he had criticized the allegedly tall promises made by the PM to farmers that remained unfulfilled. He used the one-liner that such promises were akin to saying – 'will install such a machine that

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[138] Strongman politicians are also called Bahubali politicians in common parlance in several parts of India

when fed potatoes the machine would produce gold.' However, curtailed and edited versions of the speech found wide circulation, and it seemed as though it was Gandhi who had promised such gold-producing machines, making him a butt of jokes[139]. The content of the original image, made to showcase the masculine and muscular strength and heroism of the eponymous character Bahubali, here has its tonality changed entirely by the 'anchorage' provided by the elements of Rahul Gandhi's face, the potato, and the caption 'Aloobali' that have been edited into the image (Barthes, 1978). The participation structure is designed to allow those who are critical of the alleged ineptitude, nepotism and 'dynasty politics' associated with Rahul Gandhi. The internal tone is of mockery, and can be extended to those who support the Congress leader.

Thus, the delegitimizing attacks on Gandhi seem to have an illocutionary force, an attempt to establish that this is the 'way things are.' This allows for his critics to establish a 'legitimacy gap' in his popular, public image. It also has an aspect of mythopoetic delegitimization, as some memes project a dark future for the country were he to become the Prime Minister (Van Leeuwen, 2007).
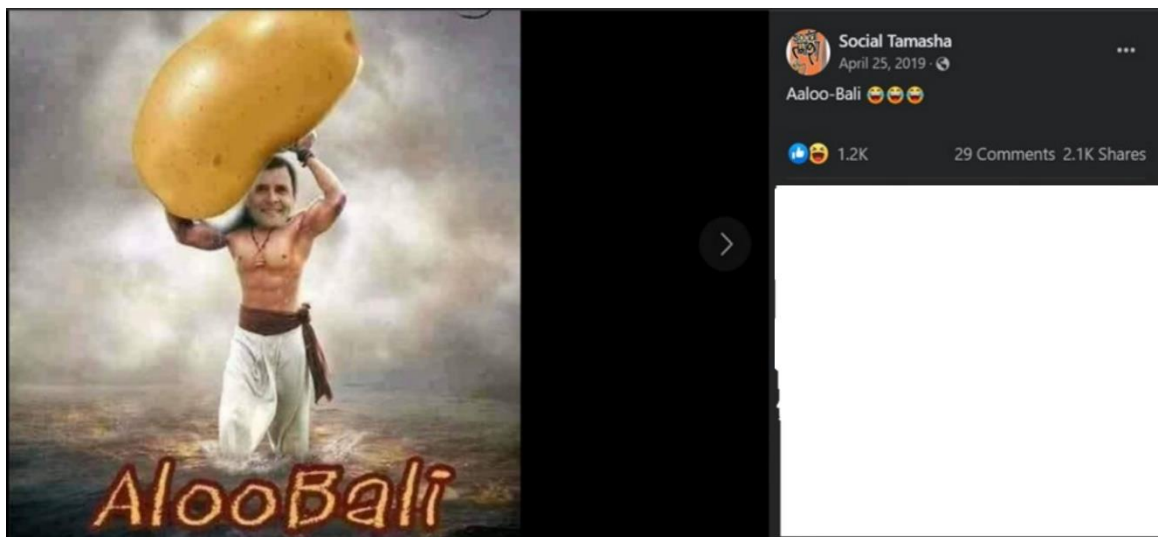
Fig. 8

Source: Social Tamasha

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[139] https://www.news18.com/news/politics/whats-cooking-the-truth-behind-rahul-gandhis-viral-potato-gold-speech-1578233.html

3b Arvind Kejriwal

Arvind Kejriwal had been a strident critic of the new BJP government since 2014, especially the Prime Minister. He had publicly questioned several of the claims made by the Prime Minister, and was also vocal against the cases of repression of civil liberties and minority persecution. He had also joined the public clamour asking for proof of the Prime Minister's educational credentials. Kejriwal also considered the animosity between his government and the Lieutenant Governor of the Union Territory of Delhi was a result of the LG being an appointment of the Central Government. These public tussles with the BJP government made him a target of the ardent followers and supporters of the Prime Minister. They lampooned him as being obsessed with the Prime Minister with no good reason, and not devoting enough attention to the governance of Delhi. In both Fig. 9 and Fig. 10 there is a certain feminized portrayal of Kejriwal, with this affect being more pronounced in Fig. 9 where the juxtaposition of the text and the pensive, pondering visage of Kejriwal strongly alludes to a jilted lover. The juxtaposition is meant to suggest that Kejriwal feels his own 'friend'/'relation' Rahul Gandhi had hurt him as Modi is more focussed on chastising Gandhi rather than Kejriwal (implying that Kejriwal is jealous that someone else is receiving the PM's attention). In Fig. 10 the top two panels feature the last words of a well-known figure in India – Gandhi's 'He Ram' after being shot, and the eponymous fictional character in the Bollywood film Devdas (whose last utterance is his lover's name). The makers seek to evoke humour and put down a political rival by imagining a scenario where, given the frequent statements by Kejriwal regarding Modi, the last words from him before death would be 'Modi.'
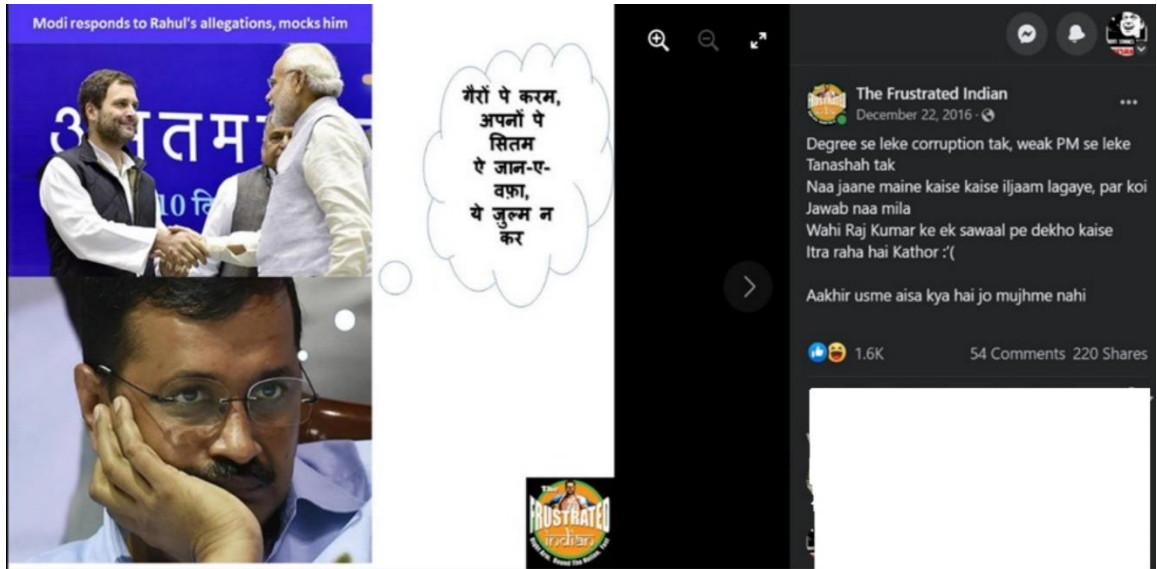
Fig. 9

Source: The Frustrated Indian
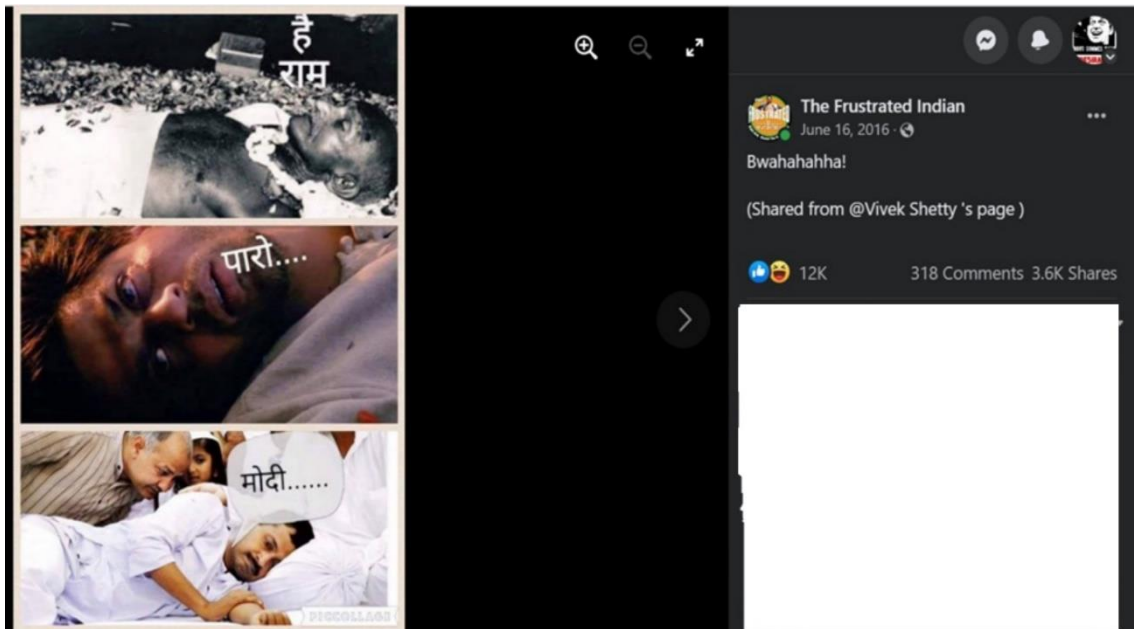
Fig. 10

Source: The Frustrated Indian

Fig. 11 targets both Kejriwal and the Congress party. The reference here is to incidents when an unwary Kejriwal has been slapped by individuals during his roadshows and rallies. The pictorial depiction of the palm here is the electoral symbol of the Congress party. Along with mocking Kejriwal for being slapped in public, the meme also pokes fun at his fraternizing with the Congress party.

Kejriwal is the target of authoritative and rationalized delegitimization here. From this political stand-point, Kejriwal is acting in a manner unbecoming of someone in his position by being antagonistic towards the PM, and criticizing him. The delegitimization also positions him as being against the 'way things are', by questioning the leadership and credentials of the PM, which from the standpoint of these memes are above reproach.
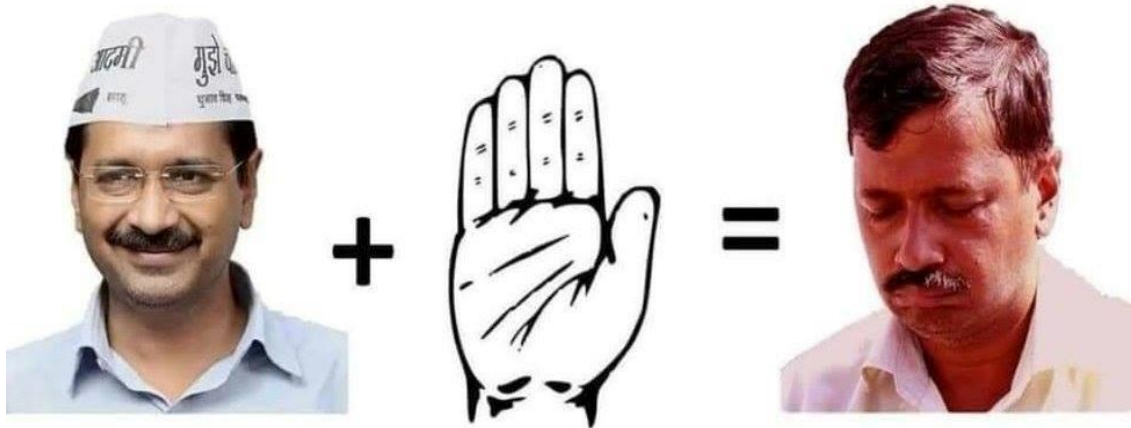
Fig. 11

Source: Social Tamasha

The participation structure in the memes are also inviting those who are opposed to the conduct and governance of Kejriwal and his regime in Delhi.

3c Narendra Modi

In Fig. 12 we see the delegitimization of the current PM and his government by those opposed to him. Fig. 12 picks up on a theme, a counter-measure that the Congress Party had sought to utilize before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections – the 'chowkidar hi chor hai'

slogan (this has been discussed extensively in Chapter 2). This meme attempts intertextual humour along the lines of this slogan from the Opposition. It has stills from an advertisement for the chewing gum brand 'Center Fresh' where the security guard of a bank himself robs the bank in disguise. But when the bank employees call out for the 'guard', he comes back and salutes, out of habit[140]. The text caption at the top of the image anchors the target of the meme further as being aimed at the 'main hoon chowkidar' campaign of the BJP and the PM. From the stand-point of memes such as this the criticism is morally evaluative in nature. The participatory structure accommodates those with a critical outlook towards the BJP government at the centre, even though the inter-textual elements used to compose the meme are accessible to a large cross-section of the population.
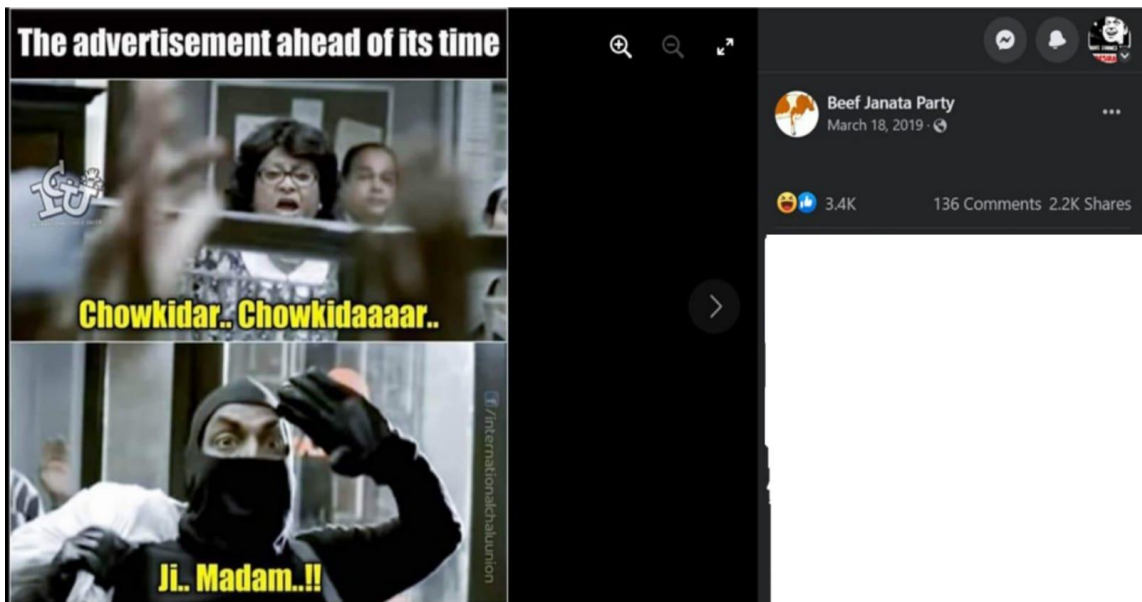
Fig. 12

Source: Beef Janata Party

Fig. 13 criticizes the apparent misuse of authoritative power by both the PM and ex-President Donald Trump to the detriment of people. Trump's speech bubbles refer to the Presidential Orders by Trump as he banned travel from many Islamic countries to the United States while also aggressively persecuting immigrants from Mexico. The speech

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[140] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLKO9c9mCi8

bubble by the PM refers to the 'demonetisation' order of November, 2016, with the unstated assumption that this move led to people's misery and suffering. The meme refers to the bonhomie between the two leaders, who are often categorized together as exemplars of contemporary global right-wing populism. The meme delegitimizes both the leaders in the authoritative register.
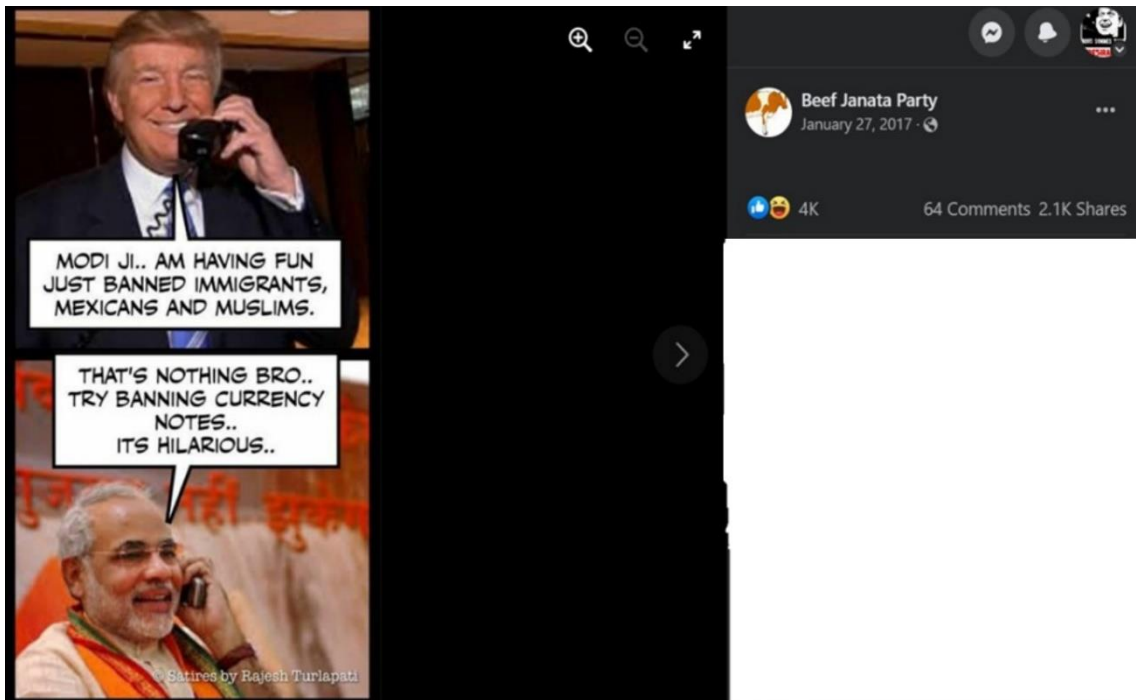
Fig. 13

Source: Beef Janata Party

The figure of the late actor Heath ledger's portrayal of the Joker in movie The Dark Knight (2009) makes an appearance in Fig 14. The scene at the bottom is after the Joker sneaks into a hospital disguised as a nurse and after a sequence of events steps out, using a detonator to cause multiple bomb explosions that decimates the hospital. The still above is captured from a biopic on the PM released before the 2019 elections with Vivek Oberoi playing the titular role. Again, the participatory structure, while employing widely recognizable elements drawn from Bollywood and Hollywood, affords space primarily to the critics and opponents of the PM. The delegitimization here is over contestation of the 'way things are' i.e. truth; the meme makes a claim that the events depicted in the PM's

biopic are inaccurate. Although the figure of the Joker can be used as a signifier of a maverick, boundary pushing anti-hero (as we will see in the next section), here the connotations are different. The tone of the meme is of mockery, aimed at the biopic's attempt to showcase the anguish of the PM as a caring ruler (the then CM of Gujarat) at the Godhra riots of 2022. It is here compared to an improbable scenario where the Joker expresses anguish and sorrow after blowing up the hospital. The posture of the actor playing the PM in the top frame attempts to serve a relay function, establishing metonymic links to background cultural caches of the benevolent leader. However, the text caption below the Joker screengrab acts as the anchor, pinning down the tone, stance and meaning the meme-makers intended to convey.
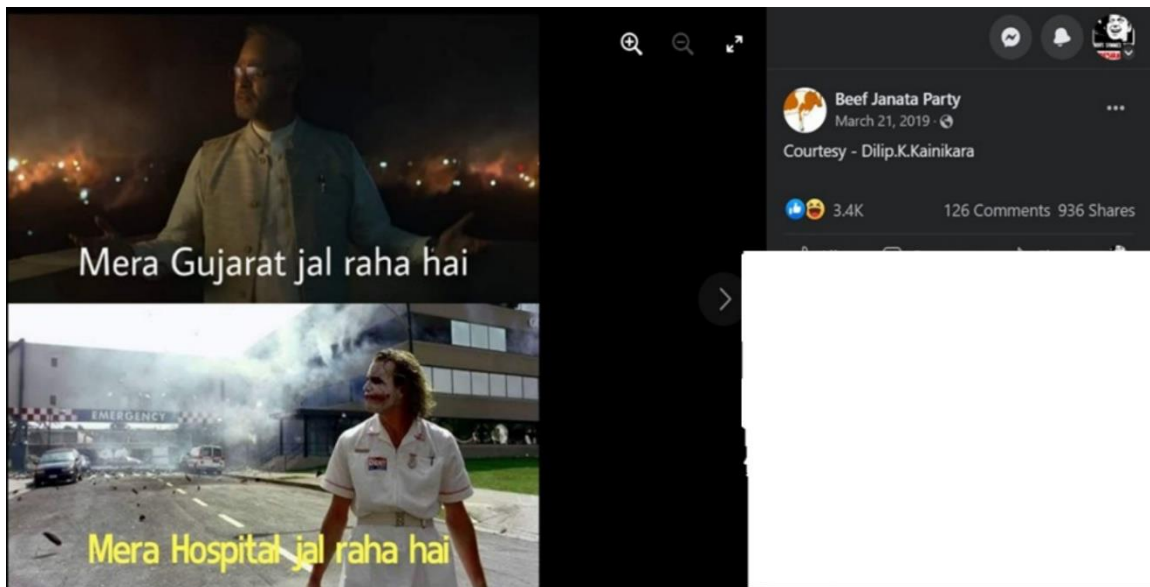
Fig. 14

Source: Beef Janata Party

4 Loyalty tests and identity reinforcement

The personnel in charge of running these pages on a day-to-day basis often draw from templates and trends of memes that are popular across the globe. One such case in which a memetic trend is made to speak to a South Asian context is seen in figure 15.
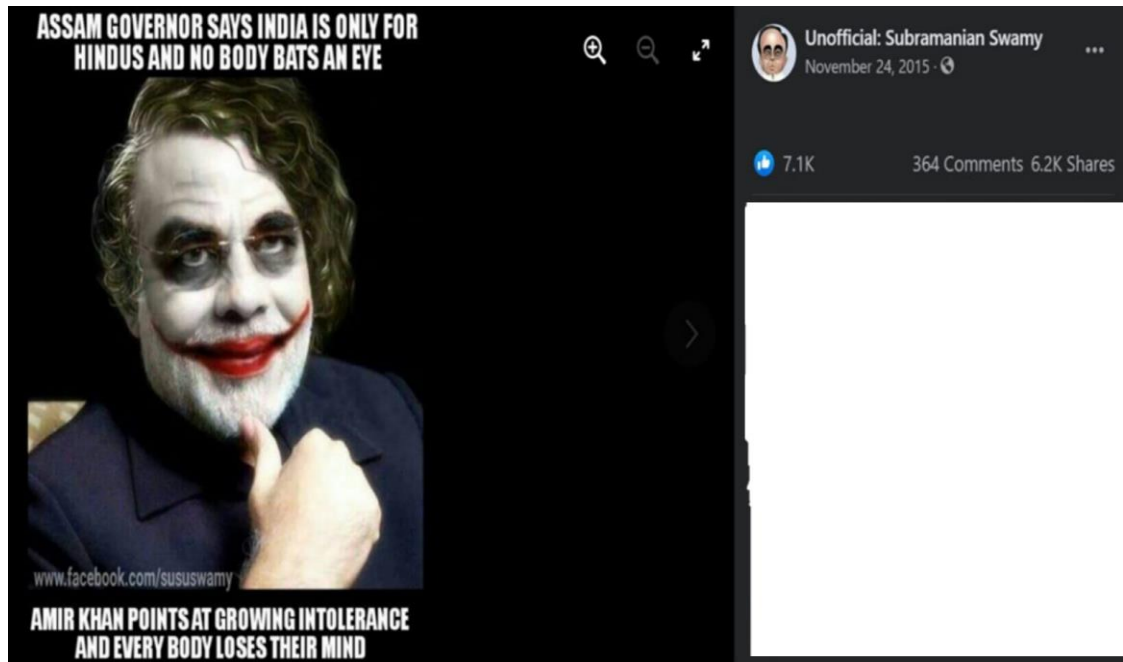
Fig. 15

Source: Unofficial Subramanian Swamy

This is a re-formulation of the 'Everyone loses their mind template'[141] used across the globe. The template features a still from the 2008 film 'The Dark Knight' directed by Christopher Nolan. The still features a gesticulating 'Joker', the antagonist/anti-hero of the film, pointing out an apparent hypocrisy in popular reaction to two different issues[142]. As is the norm online, iterations of such memes may be heavily dosed with irony.

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[141] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/everyone-loses-their-minds
[142] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfmkRi_tr9c

A LAZY EMPLOYEE, CONTINUES TO BE LAZY AND NO ONE BATS AN EYE.

A HARD WORKING EMPLOYEE, TAKES IT EASY FOR ONE DAY, AND EVERYONE LOSES THEIR MIND.
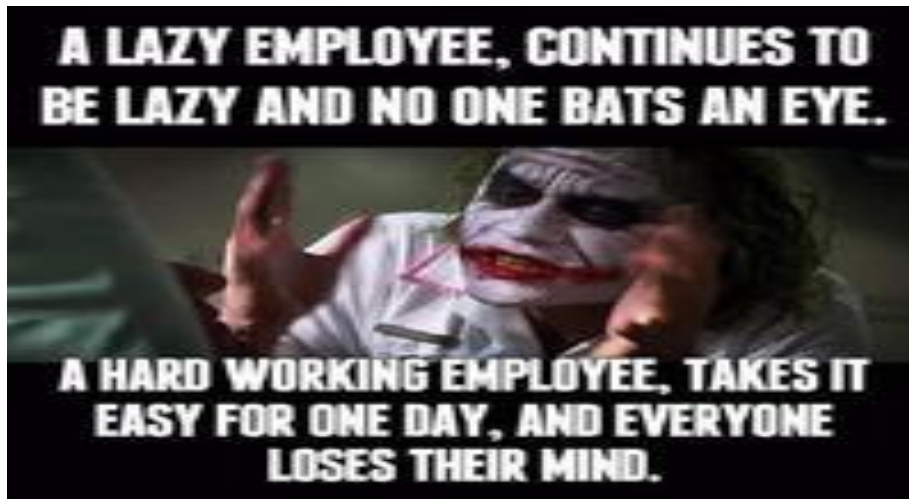
The meme in Fig. 15 features PM Modi's face instead of the actor playing Joker Heath Ledger's face. Modi's face has, however, been painted over with the signature white and extended red lips of the Joker. The meme is commenting on the controversy that arose in 2017 when Amir Khan raised the issue of growing intolerance in India's society and polity. His words were met with strident criticism, including unsavoury ones from the prominent far-right political figures. The actor was asked to 'go to Pakistan' if he found India so intolerant, that sought to exploit his Muslim identity by hinting at allegiance to Pakistan[143]. As the top text of the meme points out, someone in the position of the Governor of a state of the Union of India had publicly stated that 'India belongs to Hindus' but it did not generate anywhere near the same outrage and indignation.

The crux of the meme is in the Joker face of Modi and the text. The anchorage helps appropriate a collectively recognized template, especially to those who have regular exposure to global meme trends. Memes bearing the Joker's face is usually used in memes to convey rebellious, nihilist overtones, usually critical of existing societal attitudes and mores. The meme, instead of using the original template featuring Heath Ledger, uses the visage of the PM to drive home its critique, as concerns over intolerance had increased as

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[143] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/aamir-khan-should-either-convert-or-go-to-pakistan-hindu-mahasabha/articleshow/49908845.cms

Modi's tenure as PM began. It paints a picture of the PM as a typical 'evil' antagonist of the filmic imagination, with destructive propensities.

Memes such as Fig. 15 and Fig. 16 are transmitting messages that depend on a certain amount of familiarity and acquaintance with contemporary polarizations and fault-lines in Indian politics and political discourses. The two memes above are critical of the increasing role of religious identity and hyper-nationalism in India political discourses online. The central thematic components of these two memes serve as metonyms; they 'stand-in' for an entire *weltanchauung* and political discourse (Mielczarek, 2018). Those Indian users that identify as 'liberals' and 'nationalists' usually engage in vociferous and vitriolic exchanges using such memes. This constitutes 'nation-talk', a practice that mostly middle-class Indians engage in on social media platforms, and which discursive creates a tanglible sense of nation-hood and belonging-ness online (Udupa, 2019a).

The sample of memes selected often pose a commentary on the intertwined issue of loyalty to the nation and inalienable belonging to India. The meme in Fig. 16 is another instance of lampooning the BJP's weaponization of religious identity for electoral gain.

Fig. 16

Politicians and commentators belonging to the Hindu Right have been using support for the BJP and its government as a test of loyalty for Muslims in India, especially for Muslims. In the meme in Fig. 16, the panel on the left is quite straight-forward and features

Amit Shah, the Minister for Home Affairs for the two consecutive Modi governments and the most important lynchpin in the BJP's electoral and politicking machinery. Above the black and white profile of his is a quote of his which says that celebrations with fire-crackers would occur in Pakistan if BJP were to lose the Bihar elections[144]. The memetic response by Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy is in the panel on the right, which features an array of characters used in memes named 'Rage faces'. These facial expressions have become hugely popular across the globe and their usage is quite similar to those of emojis. Three of the ones used in this meme are variations (one of them has a moustache and a sombrero) of the 'Troll face', the most popular and commonly used, which denotes humour extracted at someone's expense (here, Amit Shah's statement). The one at the bottom right is used to denote LOL -laugh out loud. The modification of Shah's words, which also serve as a riposte, counters Shah's statement by claiming that instead, the BJP's loss would be celebrated with fire-crackers across the country.

5 Vernacular memes

As we have seen in the preceding sections the memes in the Facebook page 'Social Tamasha' are entirely in Hindi, in the Devnagari script, while in the other pages we find a mixture of memes in both English and Hindi. As is very evident, they do not follow any set template, save the usage of enlarged emojis. But they play upon themes that have been in circulation in the popular imaginary through various media texts and channels. As Hindi can serve as a lingua franca across Northern and Western India, they have a very wide reach.

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[144] https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/if-bjp-loses-crackers-will-go-off-in-pakistan-amit-shah/

Fig. 17

This meme continues the same framing of Rahul Gandhi as we had seen in section III. It features Gandhi, whose face seems pinched with eyes shut tight with effort, indicating strong emotions. The text caption conveys the pithy message that the expression has been brought about by Gandhi's confusion regarding his stance on his religious background and his political beliefs linked to religion. That there is no end in sight to this massive amount of confusion on Gandhi's part is stressed by the egg-emoji with the expressive facial features and the caption 'can't find the solution'. The thought bubbles proclaim 'I am an Islamist', 'No I am a Janeu-wearing Hindu' (a swipe at his claim to a Kashmiri Pandit lineage through his grandfather) and 'I am not a Hindu partisan but a nationalist'.

Fig. 17 derives its humour through schadenfreude at the expense of one's political opponent, as it portrays Gandhi as someone muddling through electoral politics without a clear stand-point on burning political issues. It also paints him as a feckless and opportunistic leader, whose stances change in accordance to the needs of electoral politics. The meme is premised on a polity that has witnessed a radical shift and some degree of allegiance to Hinduism or the Hindu 'way of life'. Rahul Gandhi has been forced to negotiate this hostile terrain, and his mixed lineage has often reflected the othering of identities other than Hindu in Indian politics. In addition to bearing the epithet of being 'secular elites' Rahul Gandhi is also considered a secret Muslim (because of his father's

name, Feroze Gandhi, who was actually a Parsi) and of 'foreign' origin because of his mother, Sonia Gandhi. This, too, has been in circulation in the popular imagination, as well as memes. Rahul Gandhi's Hindu credentials have essentially been marked as suspect, and this has been one of the primary channels of delegitimizing him as a prospective head of government. This is evident from the meme below, which has been taken from a Facebook page that features memes found circulating in WhatsApp in Hindi-speaking parts. We'll discuss such memes from WhatsApp in greater detail in a subsequent section.
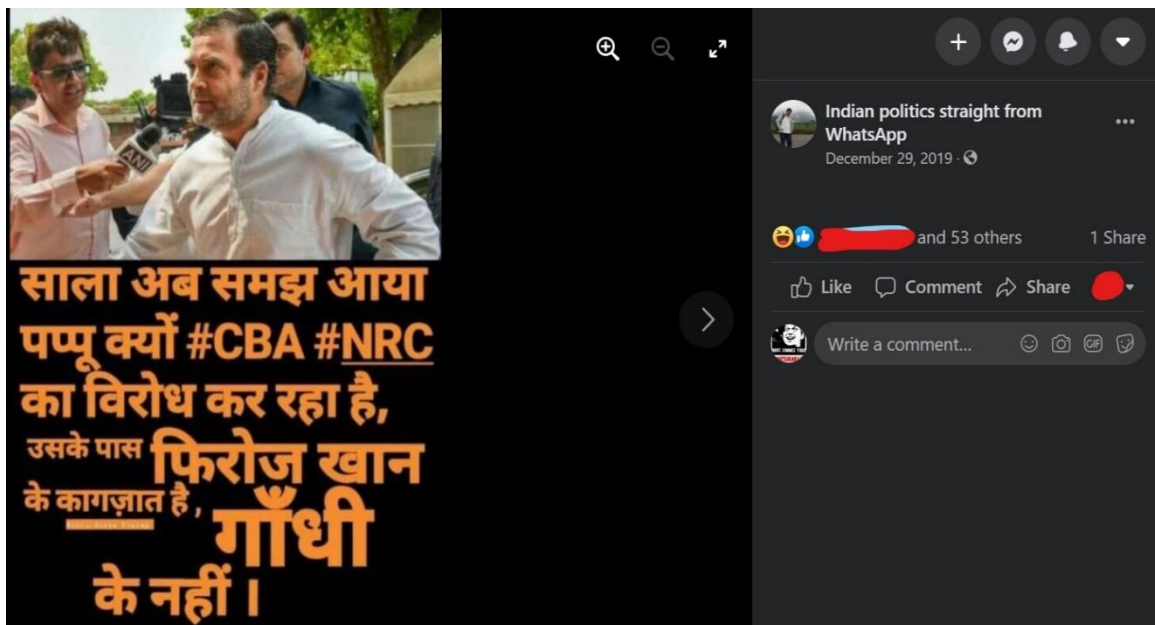
Fig. 18

Source: Indian politics straight from WhatsApp

6 History as a memetic battlefield

History has emerged as a battlefield since long in Indian political discourses. The Hindu Right seeks to pull down the existing historiography, both post-colonial, Nehruvian nationalist and peer-reviewed, academic versions, as being under the sway of 'internal' and 'external' enemies of the country. The vituperative online exchange of memes reflect this battle (Mohan, 2015). Figures such as Gandhi and Nehru emerge as prominent lightning-rods drawing the ire of the Hindu Right, as they are considered to have been

main obstacles to the making of a Hindu nation where Hindus could prosper and assert their identity. Gandhi, especially, emerges as a key memetic figure that draws the ire of the Hindu Right for denying Hindus their due and favouring the Muslims, as seen in Fig. 19. These figures are often contrasted to figures such as Vallabhbhai Patel, and prominent figures on the Hindu Right such as Savarkar.

In Fig. 19, Gandhi is depicted being flippant towards Patel's statement that the Hindus want their cultural rights secured after the British left, while he is indulgent towards Jinnah's demand for the rights for Muslims. Despite repeated interventions by noted historians, Vallabhbhai Patel is often pitted against Nehru and Gandhi[145]. The meme's keying and tone carry a clear dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'; Pakistan is to be the Islamic nation for the sub-continent's Muslims, while India is to be a Hindu nation for Hindus. The Hindus have been constructed as a victimized people, denied their due by the 'minority appeasement' policies of Congress leaders such as Gandhi. The ironic detachment that is a hallmark of so many memes is not present here. The standpoint of the meme is that of the people victimized by Gandhi, the Hindus, an 'us' arrayed against antagonists such as Gandhi and Muslims.

Fig. 19

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[145] https://scroll.in/article/953052/nehru-vs-patel-why-is-external-affairs-minister-s-jaishankar-trolling-historians-on-twitter
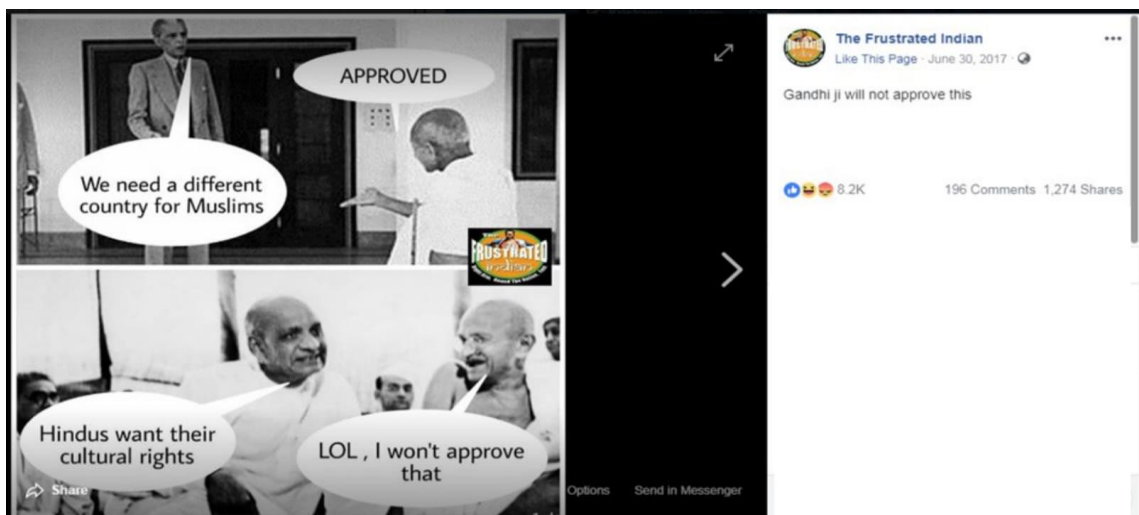
Just like Fig. 19, Fig. 20 does not figure any of the contemporary politicians under discussion here, it has an oblique yet very overt reference to the current PM in the textual part of the post. The PM here is a synecdoche for the larger attempts by the Hindu Right to portray Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel as being antagonistic figures in Indian history, with Nehru being representative of 'elite secular liberals' and Patel following a more 'nationalist' line (For those of this stand-point, Patel should have been the rightful first Prime Minister, rather than Nehru, who they allege led the country down the wrong path). This is a subject that has witnessed much debate in the popular press, with noted historians pointing out that their relationship was not one of rancour but a friendly, collegial one, in spite of their differing policy ideas.

Fig. 20

Source: History of India

Fig. 21

Source: History of India

Fig. 21 features a profile of the PM that highlights the right side of his face. He is holding his spectacles and staring into the distance, in a pose that is usually suggestive of one being pensive and deep in thought (in this case, pondering upon important matters of state). Such images usually function as an invitation to the reader/onlooker to identify with the personality in the position of leadership, which, as has been discussed in the previous chapters is quite in keeping with the schema of populism. But this official portrait of him is derailed, just as in the Fig. 5 in Section 2, by the text caption accompanying the image in this tweet, characteristic of the History of India Twitter handle.

The caption refers to a particular election campaign speech delivered by Modi before the UP state elections of 2017. In this speech, he had stated controversially – 'if a kabristan can be constructed in a village, so should be samshan'[146]. This was a jibe against the then CM Akhilesh Yadav, implying that his government's policies discriminated against Hindus and in favour of Muslims ('minority appeasement' for votes). The quote is a play on Gandhi's quote – 'an eye for an eye makes the whole world dead'. The biting, sarcastic

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[146] If you create kabristaan (graveyard) in a village, then a shamshaan (cremation ground) should be created. If electricity is given uninterrupted in Ramzan, then it should be given in Diwali without a break. Bhedbhaav nahin hona chahiye (there should be no discrimination)"
https://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/if-a-kabristan-can-be-constructed-so-should-a-shamshaan-pm-modi/story-obPfbdpUwPZm98wBKdZmTN.html

critique is further re-inforced with the morphed quote being attributed to 'Mohandas Karamchand Modi'. 'Incongruous juxtaposition' is again at play here, aimed at detracting at the aspiration to portray Modi as a 'great leader', who is of the stature of Gandhi (Milner, 2012).

7 The battles over identity construction

The figure of the political leader becomes a mouth-piece to articulate certain political stand-points in these memes. As is seen in Fig. 16, although they are meant to be humorous, these memes address issues that have grave consequences for minorities, political dissidents, issues of national-belonging etc. (as political support for a particular party becomes a marker of one's loyalty to the nation). Rahul Gandhi is seemingly torn between being a 'Muslim-wadi or a 'Hindu-wadi'. The performative role of the figure of the political leader is manifold here. The producer, transmitter and the consumer of the meme seek to make the figure of the political leader perform in certain ways. These performances are, however, informed by the dominant, mediated popular imagination. The circulation of these memes has consequences for issues of national identity and belonging.

The contested identity of an Indian here, the Indian who belongs to the *body politic*, is sought to be concretized here. This happens as the norms and attributes of this figure of the 'Indian' are repeated through circulation and transmission of these memes of leaders. Thus, these memes engage in performative 'boundary-work', which through iteration and re-iteration delineate an identity and its 'other' (Gal, Shifman and Kampf, 2016). In several of the memes above, we see the 'other' being associated with the figure of the Muslim, or those who argue for a Muslim component to the Indian identity, or seek measures to protect their distinct identity and sense of belonging to India and improve their lot ('minority appeasement'). They are opposed on social media platforms by those that consider India's alleged core principles of secularism, pluralism and inclusivity to be imperilled. We have seen instances of such individuals and groups in this chapter, in the form of 'Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy' and @realhistorypics and others.

Now, we have already seen in the first chapter that these Indian leaders do not engage in extreme speech or speak in a 'low', vulgar cultural register, unlike populists such as Duterte, Odinga, Duterte etc. (Pal et al. (2017) argue that in terms of their populist communication styles, the PM does designate and speak of 'internal' and 'external' enemies in his tweets with various levels of subtlety and dog whistles. Kejriwal and the AAP also have in their early days designated the political establishment as being the 'corrupt' antagonistic they are fighting). It is ordinary users who may associate belligerent words in memes with these leaders (Fig. 14), in a bid to legitimize or delegitimize them. The figure of the leader almost speaks through a ventriloquist in these memes, even if they might be one of those that may have been expelled from the new *body politic* with another leader at the head. We see this in the memes of Rahul Gandhi that seek to delegitimize him, especially with regard to his identity as a Hindu or a Muslim. Similarly, Kejriwal becomes a figure to be mocked.

To understand the full performative role of these memes, we must understand that they are not operating in a referential or semiotic role alone here. Through transmission and circulation in digital networks, the ideas and forms carried by these memes create the very social reality and communal divide to which they refer. This self-reflexive, poetic functions inform the larger social imagination (LiPuma and Lee, 2002; Taylor, 2002). The circulatory effect of these memes is inextricable from the performative function of these memes. Such memes can reproduce the structural exclusion of identity groups, and can act as forms of symbolic violence (Burawoy, 2019). The pro-regime memes we have seen here, sympathetic to Hindutva, seek to speak from a universal location, taking up a ventriloquistic role to speak for the entire 'people', and excluding those they consider the 'other' from the *body politic* (Gaonkar, 2003). Such memes also place those political standpoints that are critical of the ruling ideology on the 'outside', as antagonists. They engage in 'discursively creating and transmitting a negative image of the Other', thereby delegitimizing them in the public sphere (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Ross and Rivers, 2017). As they migrate through digital networks and become part of the imagination of their consumers across the country, they have the potential to strengthen ethno-majoritarian politics.

8 Intertextuality in meme production

Intertextual resources are an important part of the reason these memes find a large receptive user base, as the ideas and components in these meme are easily available for meaning-making, drawn from folk-culture, popular culture, films, mythology, news media etc. (Ott and Walter, 2000) There is a certain pleasure associated with recognizing the humour, in-jokes, cultural references etc. associated with a meme, which is rather similar to the position of spectating pleasure we see in the social media content of witty political leaders who transmit subtle messages to their followers with 'a nod and a wink'.

It is not surprising a lot of the memes are around the themes of a religious-political conjunction. This has become the dominant political discourse in media and social media for some time now. Given this, memes of political leaders that speak to these concerns find a large, receptive audience as they can easily recognize the concept and constituent elements of the meme (Varis and Blommaert, 2018). There is also a strong affective component to this, beyond the pleasure of recognizing and being able to read and transmit a meme. This stems from the fact that religiosity is a significant part of life-worlds in India, and a significant presence of religion in politics and political discourses has increasingly become normal for such societies (Duerringer, 2016; Campbell *et al.*, 2018). 'Lived religion' – the manner in which religious practices and norms dictate the conduct of private life - become determinant of civic and public spheres (Bellar *et al.*, 2013). Especially since the vigorous effervescence of the Ram temple movement in Ayodhya in the '80s and '90s, we, thus, see a 'religiofication of politics', wherein symbols and signifiers drawn from a theological repertoire become part of partisan political mobilisation. This affective pool has been tapped into very well by the Hindu Right. We have, in the second chapter, already discussed how Hindu religiosity has become a major part of the populist-stylistic appeal of the three political leaders under discussion. We can see also see this in the memes in Fig. 17-20. On the other hand, the 'politicization of religion' – the increased significance of religious issues and polarizations in the functioning of electoral politics – has also continued apace (Duerringer, 2016).

9 WhatsApp

It will be instructive memes are from a Facebook page that curates memes that circulate on Indian WhatsApp groups regarding politics.

Chatting apps have much lower entry barriers, especially for those who are not adept at technology or for those from socio-economically weaker sections. They also do not have registration processes as stringent as those seen in social media platforms. Chat platforms almost perform as an extension of SMSes, but with file sharing capabilities and the capability to form 'groups'. In addition, these platforms on smartphones can also aid in their occupations. Given the affordances of these platforms, it is no surprise that they have emerged as potent political tools, and have indeed sent alarm bells ringing among citizens, experts and governments, especially as they can serve as extremely easy means to spread disinformation, misinformation and propaganda[147]. In India important elections such as the Uttar Pradesh legislature elections of 2017 and the parliamentary elections of 2019 have involved the formation of thousands upon thousands of WhatsApp groups by political parties to get their message across[148]. Indian WhatsApp groups of varying reach, from those based on kinship, family and friendship to those based on ideologies provide us with a fascinating glimpse into the political psyche of different demographic groups.

In fact, there are many WhatsApp users who do not feel the need to be on Facebook. This is particularly because WhatsApp, unlike Facebook, is not a platform wherein one's communication is displayed in platform. This scalability of WhatsApp allows for far more control over one's audience, as one can switch between individuals and groups at one's whim. Scalability refers to the ability afforded by WhatsApp to users to choose 'the size of the group and the degree of privacy' that one believes is appropriate to one's communication (Borgerson and Miller, 2016). WhatsApp can be used for dyadic communication, or it can be used to communicate to a group of many people, or it can be used to 'forward' messages to multiple individuals and groups separately. Considerations of the economic costs also make WhatsApp a popular choice, as do the affordances of the

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[147] https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/india-whatsapp-analysis-election-security.php
[148] https://indianexpress.com/elections/bjps-election-strategy-900-rallies-67000-workers-10000-whatsapp-groups-chopper-landings-4565757/

platform that allow easy transmission of visual, audio and video content in addition to text (Venkatraman, 2017).

The visual culture of transmission over WhatsApp often reflects offline considerations and normative ideals held collectively in India. This includes cultural affiliations and social networks of which one seeks to show membership. The content shared over WhatsApp mostly consists of jokes, religious content, inspirational images and videos etc. It would be interesting to note the continuities and discontinuities of the offline with the online. Daily greetings of 'good morning' and 'good night' are also quite voluminous across the country, and bloat up the storage capacities of many a smart-phone's storage capacity. Venkatraman's ethnography shows that notions of gift-giving are associated with the everyday transmission and circulation of such content WhatsApp, which can also help shore up familial and other relationship ties with one's extended networks. Such acts of transmission seem to play a performative role here, giving rise to the very 'social' that this cultural content circulates through (LiPuma and Lee, 2002).

Fig. 22

The meme in Fig. 22 draws simultaneously from popular filmic culture as well as stereotypical presentation of the evil feminine. It is loaded with significance, and signification drawn from the everyday life-worlds and cultural consumption of a vast majority of people in India's North and East. The component material is drawn from the legendary Japanese horror movie 'Ringu' (1998). The political signification of the meme is anchored by the morphed image of a seemingly demonic Mamata Bannerjee, and the text caption in Hindi which says 'Bengal – A witch thirsty for Hindu blood'. It plays into the trope propagated by the ruling Hindu nationalist ideological block about the Trinamool Congress-ruled state of West Bengal, whose Chief Minister is TMC supremo Mamata Bannerjee. According to this largely discredited trope, Mamata Bannerjee allows for murderous attacks on Hindus to appease her Muslim vote-bank.
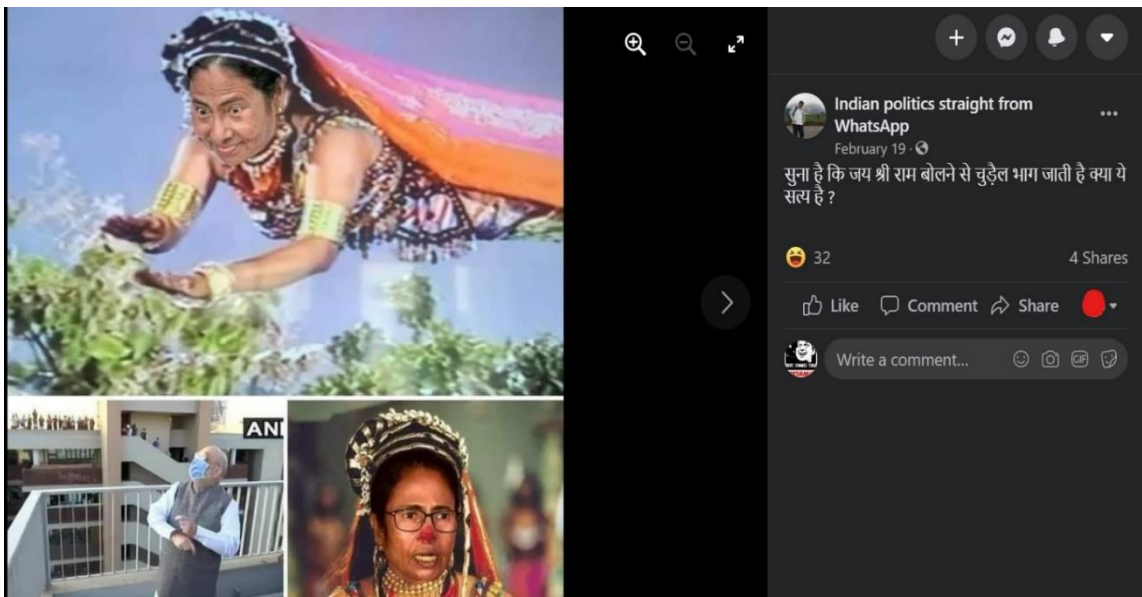
Fig. 23

In Fig. 23, we see a similar meme, drawing upon popular mythological and cultural tropes, with Mamata Bannerjee's face being super-imposed over the face that of the demoness Suparnakha, sibling of the demon king Ravana. The stills were taken from the popular Hindi TV serial 'Shri Krishna'. The sequence of stills shows Suparnakha's nose and ears being cut by India's Home Minister Amit Shah using a kite string, the connotation being that the allegedly anti-Hindu Muslim-appeasing Chief Minister of Bengal was defeated by the righteous BJP strongman. In the Ramanyana, it is the deity Ram's brother Laxman

who chops off the nose and ears of Suparnakha for her wanton attempts at seducing him. The meme, thus, attempts to violate the symbolic co-ordinates in which Mamata Bannerjee's public image had been created, as a chaste, austere maternal figure that cares, nurtures, and protects. The nurturing mother is a public image that has been projected by female politicians across the world, as public life as a female politician is fraught with peril. Female politicians are judged through frames that are different from male politicians, and the public-private distinction works in very different ways (van Zoonen, 2006).

#Ramayan #RamayanonYouTube
रामायण - EP 29 - अगस्त्य मिलन | जटायु मिलन | पंचवटी निवास | शूर्पणखा की कथा

The obverse of such antagonistic memes is the one seen in Fig. 24, which celebrates India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a strong leader. A metonymic slippage is at work here with Modi's face being superimposed on a lion, connoting strength and masculinity[149].

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[149] This also fore-grounds to the South Asian pre-occupation with thwarted masculinity, which is traced back to the coming of the Mughals, and then the British. It also acts as a referent to India's previous Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, who unlike Modi was known for his calm demeanour and lack of speeches

800/-
Ya 8000

जब शेर पाला है तो खर्चे से क्या डरना

Fig. 24

10 Masculinity in leadership: Lionized and abject

The visual metaphor of the lion, seen in Fig. 24, was pre-destined, given the carefully crafted articulation of Hindu masculinity that has been integral to the Hindutva project. It is, however, insightful to look at the signifiers that are positioned as its antonym, or disavowed as signs of a baser, inferior animalistic nature. For instance, in Fig. 25, the top half of the meme is a picture of prominent leaders of India's opposition parties, some with their fingers intertwined, others with their arms raised in a wave. The intended meaning this half of the meme intends to express is, however, the text caption that labels this gathering a 'crowd of jackals' in Hindi, with the date being May 23, 2018. The bottom half of the image is the PM waving at crowds at a roadshow after securing a landslide victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, being showered with flowers. The text caption says 'The lion has returned', with the date being May 23, 2019, exactly a year after the image at the top. The participation structure of the meme is such that the viewer is positioned as one of the 'people', rejoicing in the triumphant return of the heroic protagonist, the 'lion', after vanquishing the evil machinations of a 'pack of jackals'. The diegesis, already with the 'people' supporting the PM as its part, is on the prowl, ready to swallow more and more spectators through awe. The corporeality of the muscular, masculine hero is here not merely representative, but a form of 'presencing', with all the

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excesses it entails, allowing disenfranchised and/or aspirational voters an opportunity to share in the exercise of this sovereign corpus as it strides ever on (Nakassis, 2020). Furthermore, the 'lionized' sovereign is part of a background cultural cache of performativity, as Alexander had argued (Alexander, 2006). In India, as across the world, a 'moral economy' is constituted by pithy folk tales involving anthropomorphic animal characters, arranged in hierarchical structures considered ideal (for instance, the 'Panchatantra' or the 'Jataka' tales in India (Kaur, 2020).

Fig. 25

Source: Social Tamasha

The underside of this lionized masculinity is the disavowed fear of emasculation, especially given the memory of hierarchy of the power structures during the colonial period (this has been discussed in Chapter 1). This phobia has also been extended to

include Muslim rulers since the Turks. The metaphorical jackal, a creature of base, cunning lower down the pecking order that is perennially envious of the noble, regal lions[150], is the abject subject to be discarded. The lionized figure of the PM is an assertion and reassurance of reclaimed masculinity after the emasculation of rule by Muslims followed by the British. This is true of younger males lower in the socio-economic ladder whose aspirations, unlocked by the promises of neo-liberalism, remain unfulfilled due to its own structural contradictions. It is electorally significant because it is one of the principal performative scripts that has been the manifesto of Hindutva nationalism. Ravinder Kaur directs us towards the equally significant motif of the 'lion' or 'tiger' (and other such apex predators) for the hegemonic professional-managerial middle and upper classes, framed in terms of expanding the extractive network of capital to increase profits. The lion/hero who is decisive is thus arrayed against an array of jackals/enemies that are involved in wheeling and dealing of 'dirty' politics, of alliances. This is a framing that valorizes the populist strong-man as disciplining the democratic excesses of societies to ensure the smooth operation of capital while retaining 'traditional' status quo. The framing is not limited in India, and meme-makers seem to understand it well, as seen in Fig. 26. Here, again, we see the framing in terms of a 'filmic' plot; the text caption (loosely translated as 'those who make the impossible possible, and the possible impossible') is from a song of the hit Bollywood film with a trio of heroes, 'Amar Akbar Anthony'.

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[150] A close analogy would be the hyenas and lions in Disney's 'The Lion King'

The meme image shows Donald Trump, Putin, and Modi with the caption "Anhoni ko honi kar de honi ko anhoni" at the top and "DONALD PUTIN MODI" labels at the bottom. A Facebook post sidebar from "The Frustrated Indian" dated November 9, 2016 reads: "The new world order begins officially ! #Trump #Putin #Modi. #election2016 ~ Graphicality" with 11K reactions, 285 Comments, 2.2K Shares.

Fig. 26

Source: The Frustrated Indian

Similarly, Kejriwal here faces delegitimization and ridicule due to his alleged lack of a muscular, lion-esque physique. Here, the central focus of the ridiculed, disavowed, abject focus is the outline of what the meme claims to be a paunch in Kejriwal's physique. The image captures Kejriwal at a rather unflattering posture, and the meme claims through the text caption that the paunch is of 56-inches, a comparison to the PM's 56-inch chest, a significant component connoting his strength and decisive leadership. The alleged blubber, on the other hand, carries a plethora of negative connotations for Kejriwal, and has no association with the muscular masculinity of a cinematic hero. It carries the everyday humdrum-ness of a mundane salaryman, or worse, someone who has supped on ill-gotten gains, rather than someone destined for heroism. The image and the text caption here play a relay function, reinforcing each other to disseminate the intended meaning.

Fig. 27

Manmohan Singh, the current PM's predecessor serves as another co-ordinate of inadequate masculine leadership, from which the PM's demeanour is a departure. Singh was given the moniker of 'Maun'mohan Singh, for his supposed lack of responses to the multiple crises that had gripped the UPA II government, including GDP growth figures that were flagging. This criticism was also with regard to his responses to interior and exterior 'enemies' of the nation and its 'people'. His leadership was further delegitimized by the discourse that positioned Sonia Gandhi as the 'real' power behind the Prime Minister, pulling the strings of power and governance. Fig. 28 paints a picture of the obviousness of this being the case, with a still image of Singh being apparently pushed aside by a security guard while making way for Sonia Gandhi. The difference with the image below is quite stark, which features Modi striding resolutely alone, surrounded only by security guards and sub-ordinates. In Fig. 29 the makers of the meme have created a fictional conversation between the PM and a terracotta soldier on display in China, poking fun at the 'maun' character of Singh, who is supposedly less lively than a terracotta figure. The oratorical skills, with the vocal inflections, slogans, crests and troughs of the current PM stand in sharp relief in contrast with the even-toned delivery of his predecessor.
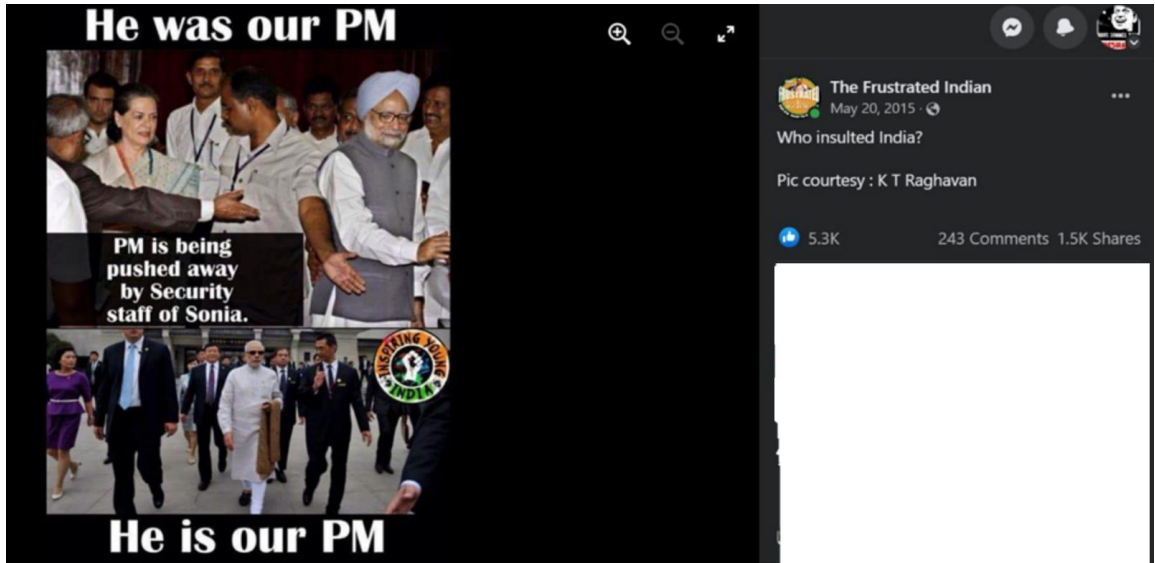
Fig. 28

Source: The Frustrated Indian

Fig. 29

Source: The Frustrated Indian

10a A short genealogy of the 'chaati'

Although it might seem so due to retroactive effects, the physique of iconic figures in much of Indian visual works did not always make an emphasis on a 'tough', 'hard' warrior's body a pre-occupation. In fact, several schools of North Indian iconography

insisted upon a smooth, soft, uniform physique for mythological/religious deities. The power of these deities flowed from transcendental, divine sources, and graced the devotee through their eyes and visage (Jain, 2007). Even in the case of Hanuman, the physical powers (*bal, shakti*) paled in comparison with his faith (*bhakti*, towards Ram) and discipline (Jain, 2004). An earlier generation of screen image-fuelled cine-stars who turned into Chief Minister and political behemoths in their respective states – M.G. Ramachandran and N.T. Ramarao – also featured supple and graceful features, rather than 'hard'-ness, for it was considered unfit for the various roles they played on screen (Prasad, 1999).

This 'godly', aggressive musculature, more akin to a Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger, has a history that Kajri Jain has traced to the 'nexus of the post/colonial state and the mass-produced bazar art of North India'. The Congress government promoted imagery of citizens dedicated to serving the nation, and the 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kishan' posters and calendar art in the mass-market/*bazaar* of that period featured lean, muscular working-class figures of the soldier and the peasant/farmer. Here, under an ostensibly secular, socialist state, the devotion is towards the nation instead of towards a deity. As the 1960's turned into the 1970's, the chief image of the ideal masculine figure, from screens to posters and magazine covers, was that of the 'angry young men' roles played by Amitabh Bachchan. This was a period when the socio-economic contradictions of the post-colonial state and society rose to the fore in terms of conflicts, strikes, protests, mass-movements such as those led by Jayaprakash Narayan, the Emergency etc. This disillusionment with the state and the institutional processes with regard to the pursuit of rights and justice led to vigilante action being the main narrative plot-point. Bachchan was especially known for these roles, with his shirts and jackets baring his chest, a signifier (*seena/chaati*) that tapped into traditional masculine virtues of bravery, loyalty, virility etc. Such stylistic elements came to be a channel for expressing the unfulfilled promises of post-colonial India (Jain, 2004).

These stylistic and narrative elements are quite different from the image-work involved in the populist aura surrounding NTR, for instance, who on several occasions played the role of the state official who was incorruptible and worked to provide solutions to social evils

and exploitation through the application of institutional tools and processes. In one of his films, NTR was even in several montages with portraits of Indira Gandhi at the background, playing the role of the 'revolutionary' agent of the state, bringing justice to down-trodden rural peasants and labourers[151] (Srinivas, 2018, p. 201). As Hindutva agitation began gaining ground in the 1980s and Ram Janambhoomi movement became violent, this musculature migrated more and more into the 'holy' warrior figures of Ram, Krishna and other deities.

The narrative and semiotic elements of the performative roles we see in the memes discussed in this section lead us to concretized examples of the mode of address that these leaders constitute a 'people'. These memes are, after all, created from the official images and press photographs of the leaders. The politics of the people flow from consumption, being 'prosumers' and from being audience-d through such memes. The dominant motifs in the memes point towards the 'melodramatic public' that Ravi Vasudevan had formulated. As Partha Chatterjee argues:

> 'The simple world of melodrama, peopled by suffering heroes and heroines, scheming villains and well- meaning buffoons, is ideally suited to depict a utopian world in which virtue is protected and vice punished. This narrative formula has been successfully deployed by filmmakers to rhetorically unify the heterogeneous publics it sought to reach. It fitted perfectly with the romantic idea of the people as the perennial repository of the authentic nation, unsullied by the corrupt touch of colonialism. It took but a small step to turn this ubiquitous cinematic mode into a general feature of the performance of the people in public life. I believe melodrama has become the generic narrative form of popular democracy in India.'

We can see the operation of this in the following memes, created using promotional posters of the characters in the super-hit film 'Bahubali'. While Sushma Swaraj plays the role of the virtuous and just ruler 'Sivagami', Manishankar Aiyar plays the role of a

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[151] A narrative constituent that went into the image-work with Bollywood flicks was also the annihilation of the 'villain' or the antagonist, be it an unscrupulous businessman, politician or a lumpen hoodlum, often through violent means by the muscular hero. In the Southern cinematic vehicles of NTR and MGR, the image-work established them as populist heroes who could defeat the antagonists in feats of physical prowess, but would then would go to reform them and show them the error of the ways. The conclusion of the film would usually involve the greedy landlord or corrupt official engaging in tasks of charity, remonstrance and so on. This maintained the socio-economic status quo while showcasing a form of paternal justice towards the plebian classes.

physically deformed but cunning, scheming villain who becomes her husband through trickery. His offspring is the movie's primary antagonist/'villain' Rahul Gandhi, an undeserving king, while the eponymous 'hero' is the PM who wrests the crown from Gandhi/'Bhallaladev', thus setting things 'right'. In this narrative justice is served and the crowd, an echo of the 'people' of whom 'Bahubali'/the PM is the rightful/benevolent ruler, chant the name of the 'hero' at multiple points.

Fig. 30, 31

Fig. 32,33

Conclusion

Populism, scholars argue, calls for a 'representation without representation', an immediacy with no mediation. As Mazzarella argues, populism involves:

> '…dreaming of a direct and immediate presencing of the substance of the people and, as such, a reassertion, a mattering forth of the collective flesh—where the matter is at once the sensuous substance of the social, the flesh, and the meaningful ways in which it comes to matter.' (Mazzarella, 2019)

Liberal institutional discourses do not foreground the somatic and the corporeal, collective or otherwise. However, as we have discussed vis-à-vis Francis Cody in the first chapter, fleshy, embodied entanglements have always been the animating agent of Indian publics, working in consonance or conflict with institutionalised processes and discourses (Cody, 2015). he laudatory memes of the leaders discussed here, flashing on users' smartphone screens, allow the user/citizen/follower to lay claim to the 'bio-moral'[152] community (Michelutti, 2013). The community/collective is called into being by the leader due to the participatory structures of these images. In the case of leaders such as the PM who have a pan-national reach, the 'bio-moral substance' that the 'people' lay claim to is constituted by the corporeal and visual-symbolic rhetoric and discourse we have witnessed in this study. Such a process involves the political leader's '…aim to shape and purify the collective consciousness, thus bringing about a new society and a new humanity here on earth' and 'claims to have the answer to the ultimate questions'. This is especially the case with the PM and the discourses around his corporality, transmitted largely by his fans and followers. The memes themselves and the attempted iconicity of the original photographs on which they are based afford opportunity structures to individual citizens and users to derive the pleasure of spectatorship (Nakassis, 2020), and be the 'people' being constituted around him. Some of the memes allow the viewers to derive *schadenfreude*

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[152] The concept 'bio-moral' has been used in sociological studies of India with regard to practices of food, bodily secretions, clothing, social association etc. that plays a part in the kinship and inter-generational transmission of caste-based hierarchical structures and distinctions. Studies of political leadership in India also locate support for certain regional leaders being generated through claims of a caste and kinship-based bio-moral community. However, there is also a symbolic and myth-making aspect to such bio-moral communities that generate 'iconic' and prominent political leaders. This is more evident in cases such as that of Hugo Chavez, who did not have a neatly defined 'blood' and kinship-structure such as caste to define the bio-moral community.

and humour from poking fun at the opposition leaders. The meme-makers themselves are afforded the 'fun' of political participation and political work (Udupa, 2019b). Those that are fortunate may even be 'blessed' by a follow-back on Twitter or an acknowledgement of their comment.

The 'bio-moral' sensual corpora that constitute the 'people' may be ambiguous about those allowed to or not to be a part of this community. Some memes that delegitimise the Opposition or individual leaders, such as Manmohan Singh, through comparison locate the 'enemy' of the 'people' (the 'pack of jackals') in them (Figures 22-28). Others locate the constituent ground of the 'people' in the alleged historical injuries suffered by Hindus (due to Gandhi, Nehru etc.) (Figures 16-21). On the other hand, some memes locate the people concretely in their Hindu identity, such as Fig. 33. And the corporeal body in which this community, this 'people' come into being, is the figure of the PM, established through the image-work in various ways seen in these meme pages. This is political labour performed voluntarily to a large extent; the economic nexus of 'IT cells', bots and paid trolls cannot dim the importance of this spirit of volunteerism.

In his study of the myth and image-making around Hitler, Ian Kershaw argues that, in addition to the persisting socio-political circumstances that the NSDAP and its leader exploited, German society and culture had already had strands of cultish desire for a Fuhrer figure (Kershaw, 2001). In Indian politics, however, the rise of iconic leaders cannot be traced to such a phenomenon. Madhava Prasad constantly cautions against attributing any inherent 'devotional' characteristic of Indian voters that lead to massive followings of the image of individual political leaders (Prasad, 2009). Such leaders have created personalised 'brands' at the highest rungs of power, taking advantage of existing social conditions and crises (sometimes in their respective political parties). Some have been pushed as a vehicle for a particular party to attain more tremedous electoral success, but have instead made parties their personal vehicles. MGR is the primary exemplar of this path (Prasad, 2006; Subramanian, 2011). Others, such as NTR, were the lynchpins that started their parties as vehicles for themselves, as representatives of an ethno-linguistic sub-nationality (Srinivas, 2018).

The issue and concept of the term 'representation' are crucial here. Leaders such as MGR and NTR had a variant of paternal populism that appealed to the most disenfranchised plebian sections, poor housewives etc.[153] [154] (Subramanian, 2011). Much like Louis Bonaparte in 1848's France (chronicled in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*) these adept political operators emerged, by dint of their screen personas and public image, as the figureheads who could channel the plebian aspirations unleashed by democratic reforms[155] (Marx, Cowling and Martin, 2002). Similarly, the image of the PM, and to a certain extent Kejriwal, managed to tap into the upwardly mobile aspirations (and frustrations due to the resultant caste and class contradictions) that had been produced by the liberalisation of 1991. Thus, we find that the performances of the political leaders prove most 'felicitous' and convincing for the audience/voting public with certain alterations, as the visual schema and cultural script circulating and constituting the popular imagination stems from the contemporary techno-cultural interventions of screened mediation – cinema, popular culture and social media platforms. The 'background cultural cache' to which Alexander alludes is constituted by the national archives of theatricality and popular cultural visuality, following a melodramatic narrative (Alexander, 2006).

As pointed out in the previous section, the PM's memes can, to borrow and alter a phrase from Marx, can be 'many things to many people'[156], including his critics (or 'enemies') (Marx, Cowling and Martin, 2002). This is necessary for him to be able to constitute the 'people' and their counterpart after his corporeal image. However, this does not make his archive of images completely polysemous; there are dominant points where meaning is sutured according to the need of the hour. The strong 'lion'-ised masculine imprimatur that protects the nation from enemies, from the messiness of Indian democracy and neo-liberalism and forges the path to progress is the principal image-body. Strongly linked to

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[153] Due to the socio-economic trajectory and state-society relations in post-Independence new conglomerations of caste and class emerged in both agrarian and urban contexts (for example, the middle peasantry that benefitted the most from the Green Revolution)

[154] However, unlike later movements such as those seen during the 'Second Democratic Upsurge' there was no move to challenge hierarchies for social justice, just as in the cinema featuring these actors turned politicians

[155] The other political parties failed to structure such energies, as the various social segments approximating to the bourgeoisie failed to take leadership

[156] He was simultaneously the panacea to the 'policy paralysis' of the UPA II government, the executive who would make India more accessible to foreign capital, the protector of the interests of small business owners of India, an end to 'appeasement politics' and true upliftment of Muslims, a Hindu nationalist etc.

this is the subtler image of the Hindu nationalist, redressing alleged injustices to the Hindu body politic since the coming of the Mughals, bringing the sub-continent under the rule of a Hindu after centuries.
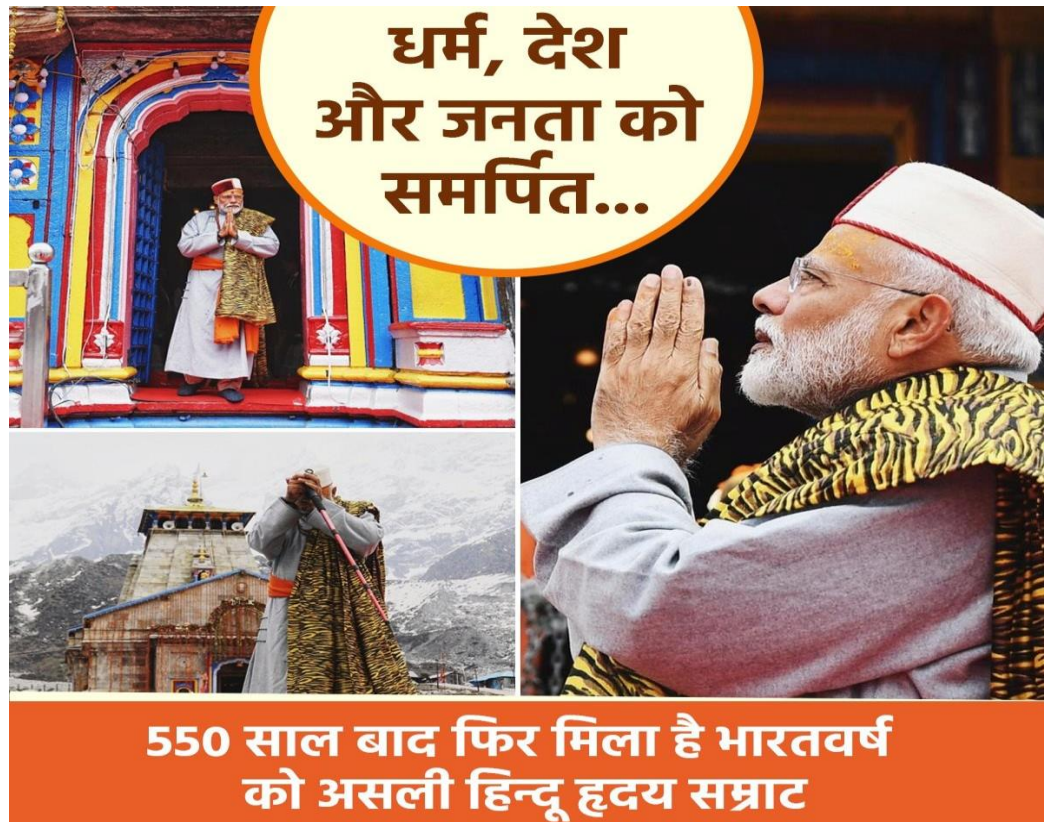
Fig. 34

Source: Social Tamasha

The smooth, suave, carefully curated fashionable image is not merely to assert confidence to an international audience, but also to lend vicarious bodily pleasures of hitherto denied consumption for the more disenfranchised followers. Like MGR's screen roles, which were mostly from subaltern locations but defeated the educated and the elite through mastery of the qualities of these sections, the PM's conspicuous consumption also has an 'in-your-face' quality to the more urban and elite sections of his critics, which brings vicarious pleasure to the spectator(Pandian, 2015; Pal *et al.*, 2017).

This is no regression to the past; the rise of the PM's image is very much a product of mediated mass democracy. He is the 'king chosen' by the 'people'. To carry Madhava

Prasad's argument forward, the carefully crafted bodily curation is merely the newest iteration of a populism where aesthetics and politics are closer than ever, and the leader is a result of 'substitution', rather than mere 'representation' of the electorate (Prasad, 2006). The PM's corporeal image seemed to always already have the qualities to seek a way out of the political and socio-economic crises plaguing the country, as though he were destined to become the leader ('the chosen one', to follow a literary and cinematic trope). But there is a disjuncture from previous populist iterations, too. In the melodramatic unfolding of events here, the 'hero' liquidates the 'villains', 'the pack of jackals' in a totalising script. There is no opportunity for remonstrance that upholds the previous order of things, as a new, more polarised order is set in place.

CHAPTER V

THE CYBER-PUBLICS: HEGEMONY AND CONTENTION

These lines, admittedly at first glance taken out of context from Lauren Berlant's work, shall inform much of the enquiry contained within this chapter. When speaking of the collective presence of users on social media platforms very publicly visible, one situates oneself in a tradition of inquiry that has been in operation since antiquity. In this case, one has to consider the singular structural imbrications at play that, to varying degrees, determine the nature of these collective interactions and their (political) impact. Chief among them are the technological affordances and constraints, the issues animating these interactions, and the specific mode in which 'public'-ness and publicity are understood in a particular social context. This chapter will engage with these issues as they pertain to the data discussed in the earlier chapters.

The chapter begins with some continuity from the previous chapter. We mark the distinct middle-class signature that is found in the administrative labour that goes into the meme-sharing pages we discussed in Chapter IV. We then move on to the topic of middle-class ideological hegemony in Indian social formations that is intricately tied to an aspirational image that populist leaders have tapped into. The nature of 'networked publics' online needs to be understood in conjunction with electoral politicking (welfare, caste equations etc.) and political economy offline**.** Thus, a section looks at the changing governance measures and electoral overtures of the current PM's regime, from before the 2014 elections till the 2019 elections. We examine how the 'people' were cobbled together through various means, such as manifesto promises and welfare measures. We have a brief section where we unwrap the empirical example of a few comments accompanying two memes, which help us flesh out how the contentious role of history and identity in the popular imagination requires us to go beyond psephology and political economy. This is followed by a conceptual discussion regarding the nature of collectives in a populist milieu on a digital platform and their relationship to the leader.

1 Playfully political collectives

The memes do display 'banal' nationalism or a playful celebration of national identity, but it also asserts contested forms of 'hot', emotive nationalism, both secular-inclusive and

exclusionary. Further, memes such as the one in Fig. 16-21 are an everyday performance of the identity of 'Indian-ness' on social media platforms, or at least the increasingly hegemonic Hindutva notion of 'Indian-ness'. Social media platforms have always been a fertile ground for the exploration, negotiation and solidification of identity. Media texts can be appropriated and transformed to be interpreted according to the necessities of one's socio-economic context (Guenther *et al.*, 2020) (Frazer and Carlson, 2017). The affordances presented by contemporary technological advancements makes possible this ludic endeavour that is often performed with volunteer labour. Online volunteer workers/activists have been prominent for quite a few years, especially from the BJP and the Aam Aadmi Party (Webb, 2020) (Chaturvedi, 2016). Such playful volunteer labour is often driven not just towards achieving specific goals but also by the pursuit of 'fun' though a certain set of practices on these social media platforms. Memes such as fig. 19, which mocks liberal/secular sensitivity towards Islamic mores, serve as a subversion of the erstwhile post-colonial 'Nehruvian' Indian nation-state and its attendant order and institutions. In the Hindutva revision of Indian history, this era is often considered synonymous with degradation, corruption and betrayal of the 'homeland' of Hindus (to appease religious minorities and for self-aggrandizsement by the regime) (Udupa, 2019).

The playful, humourous hook draws the casual user scrolling through their feed into the meme, especially the social media-savvy younger population and draws them into the intended message (Penney, 2020). The political articulation happens in the space between this di-polar arrangement with playful humour on one pole and 'serious' political implications on the other hand. In fact, this provides a refreshing divergence for the user from the usual news reportage and commentary on politics (Tay, 2014). These memes replete with mythology and popular culture are delivered in a colloquial idiom that is absorbed quicker. Interest can also be piqued by the possibility of reworking these memes and transmitting them further to deliver one's own political commentary. Meme's often ask the readers of performing the labour of comprehending the argument encoded (with varying degrees of complexity) in these memes, rather than always explicitly laying the argument out. This space or gap that is left in memes always invites the readers to intervene, work their own interpretations and ideas into memes and pass them on (Huntington, 2016). Recognition can be accrued in one's respective ideological networks through this process.

There is a collective, crowd-funded aspect to pages and sites such as these that host these memes that induces a feeling of political community.

In these memes users find themselves being hailed and addressed as a part of competing visions of the nation, visions that have been shaped by histories of differential access to state power and publicity, colonial histories of state-media-people relations etc.(Chakravartty and Roy, 2017) These 'split' publics, as Rajagopal calls them, are mobilised keeping in mind the architecture of social media platforms to exploit their affordances and weaknesses (Lawson, 2018a) (Rajagopal, 2009). Users perform the task of judgement that they (and others like 'themselves') are the intended audience of these memes (and then transmit them further to their own circles)(Lange, 2009).

The recurrence of memetic conventions has a function that is in excess of its meanings. Such conventions let the readers know they are in presence of memetic content, whose ontological significance can never be confined to any single iteration. Its circulatory ontology always pre-supposes a plurality of readers (Wark, 2015). Even to those not well-versed in memetic convention, the elements in the memes discussed here can lead to experience of collectivised affect. Along with mythology, scenes from Bollywood and cricket evokes feelings of familiarity and affinity. Feelings, emotions and affect are not entirely divorced from texts, and are enmeshed with them such that they are evoked along semi-structured patterns (Kanai, 2019a). Such content, therefore, can constitute phatic communication. More importantly for this discussion such content may lead to feelings 'phatic communion' according to anthropologist Branislaw Malinowski, an affect of collective effervescence induced through ritual-like activities (Varis and Blommaert, 2018).

2 Middle-class administration and memetic work

The constituent elements of the memes as has been seen in the analyses above seems to appeal to a particular middle-class sensibility, both from urban and mofussil areas, and those working in professional and semi-professional sectors. Mohd. Zubair, who created Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy worked as an IT professional. This middle-class character is hardly surprising, as prior research by one of the authors of this paper and other scholars have found the prevalence of mostly middle-class values, cutting across ideological lines,

in social media platforms. Even investigations of right-wing vs liberal memes in India found a pronounced middle-class slant (Kumar, 2019) (Doron, 2016a). The publics that form around these memes find in them a reassurance of the imagination of the nation, but also a field of contending imaginations. Both the 'secular-liberal' and 'nationalist' imaginaries of India and belonging-ness are found in the memes from these sites.

A majority of the content in these online sites are in English, although content in Hindi is present too. The English used is usually not archaic or overly verbose and is accessible. It is made considering a mostly North Indian audience, with its political being mostly Delhi and Hindi-belt centric. Compared to issues of secularism, communalism, state excesses and malfeasance, misgovernance etc. caste finds relatively lesser focus in the social media platforms selected. When the issue of caste is focussed on it is usually done through the lens of a drawback in the camp of the political opponents.

The personnel responsible for running these sites seem to be performing certain roles through the dissemination of these memes, aimed at attaining objectives both implicit and explicit. These are 'enthusiastic networked individuals' as Castells called them, that 'catalyze, fuel and sustain' these sites (Boler *et al.*, 2014). Not only are these personnel in charge of administering the pages, they also perform the role of 'documentarian', capturing the contemporary zeitgeist in memetic form in their pages (Bakardjieva, Felt and Dumitrica, 2018a). Their work blurs the boundaries between Bennet and Segerberg's 'connective action' and the older notion of collective action. Their work is not confined to online forms of political activism but operates in a 'hybrid' media ecology; it is intensely engaged with political news media and the everyday political goings-on of India's polity, both online and offline. The sites, operating at opposite poles of the ideological spectrum, seemingly operate over a broad foundation of certain presumptions, and one of the principal assumptions is that of the model of an 'informed citizen', that makes rational, well-thought-out decisions after perusing through information (the veracity of the information is contested). This is very easily seen in memes with historical referents, such as Fig. 20 and Fig. 21. This landscape of history is deeply fractious and partisan, as has been seen in the memes. This model of citizenship can, however, be quite limited (Hirschkind, 2009). Publics have evolved in the Global South with affective, corporeal intensities along racialised, classed

and gendered lines that are quite different from the classical Occidental model of detachment and cognition (Cody, 2015a).

3 The hegemonic middle class

The BJP and the Modi campaign tactically cobbled together a voting bloc from the different sections of the Indian electorate across the 2014 and the 2019 elections. The evidence strongly suggests that the PR campaign behind the portrayal of Modi has had diverse manifestations (with significant overlapping) to match the changing political and economic wind. As has been repeated at various points the broad ideological orientation of the middle-class has remained a mainstay of the ideological fulcrum that has fuelled Modi's rise (aspiration, reduction in state intervention, infrastructure over welfare, reduction in rent-seeking behaviour, reduction in 'minority appeasement' etc), even as Modi has switched to a more welfarist appeal after 2014. And as the online spaces under discussion here are mostly hegemonised by middle-class perspectives this is a segment that warrants a closer look for the purposes of this research.

Numerical aggregate has never been the core strength of the middle-class. Since the inception of modern forms of constitutional democracy the middle class-class has often given itself (and so have many prominent intellectuals and leaders) the mantle of responsibility to uphold societal integrity and progress. Even as far back as Hellenic antiquity, Aristotle and others had given the middle-class the pride of place in a polity. Tocqueville was full of praise for the class in colonised North America that was 'neither exactly rich nor poor', that desired 'order' and had a 'natural horror' for revolutions. This was a class that supposedly evoked no ressentiment from the poor nor bore any envy for the rich, playing a balancing act between the two, stabilising a democracy (in terms of numbers, Aristotle stressed upon a large enough middle-class population to act as a stabiliser) (Baviskar and Ray, 2010). This has, however, proven to be a largely misplaced confidence, and so it has been the case with India. The middle class served a purpose during the colonial times, providing the British empire with the administrative and clerical personnel required to run an expansive and often unruly sub-continent. A select number was even inducted into the Indian Civil Service, an erstwhile white-only venture of the British empire (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). The domination of Hindu upper-castes in this

cohort has remained a recurrent phenomenon over time, given their access to formal educational and literary systems and institutions considered legible. A command over the English language, as a medium of education and communication, has been an especially noteworthy feature that finds resonance to contemporary times (Pandey, 2010). Some of the middle-classes did join in the reformist movements of the 19th and 20th century led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others. The independence movement and the Indian National Congress, too, drew several prominent members from the middle classes (Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

3a The developmentalist middle-class

Post independence, as the highest echelons of the political establishment were deciding upon the road-map to building a modern sovereign nation-state, it was decided that the middle-class would be key to the running of the nation-state and implementing the vision of the political and economic establishment. Similar to many other processes and institutions, this was a carry-over of roles from the colonial era. Ostensibly, this stratum was supposed to expand along with the Nehruvian developmental state, and be the disseminators of the ideals of reason, progress and modernity to the rest of the population. In the euphoric aftermath of the independence movement it was believed the Constitution and various provisions would lead to the eventual dismantling of oppressive customary structures and hierarchies such as caste as well as ameliorating poverty (Jodhka and Prakash, 2016).

However, what transpired on the ground was a pervasive system of rent-seeking behaviour that enriched the largely Hindu upper-caste constituents of the middle-class. India's economic policy based on a nationalized, import-substitute industrialization path failed to reduce the clout of the domestic industrial and financial bourgeoisie. The middle-class held the positions in bureaucracy that had the levers of governance and policy, and came into complex negotiations with regional/local elites and the powerful landed, agrarian sections in rural areas. This set up an arrangement that has been understood as 'clientelism'/'patronage' politics based on a system that benefited these classes (Fernandes, 2010) (Jodhka and Prakash, 2016). The middle-class was also represented in the media and in the business-industrial establishments. Although ties based on ascriptive categories were

supposed to wither away in the modern, rational, developmental state the middle-classes were instead found to organize unofficially along the lines of caste and region, jockeying for the advancement of one's *jati* and sequestration of resources. Reforms looking at disproportionate concentration of land-ownership in the hands of certain castes failed in most parts of the country, while the formal, unionized labour sector always remained a tiny fraction of the total workforce of the country. The landed agrarian elites regularly subverted the state's attempts, and managed to secure subsidies, while the private industrial power-houses subverted ISI to suit their needs (Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

Scholars such as Pranab Bardhan and Sudipta Kaviraj had argued that the agrarian, industrial and bureaucratic elites had come into a power-sharing arrangement. The middle-class too was quite heterogenous, and had not just white-collared professionals from various fields. There were certain sections of the industrial and public sector workers who could be counted in this field. Similarly, there was a section of the agrarian population whose income levels put them in the middle-class. However, determining the boundaries of the middle-class based on income has always yielded unsatisfactory results. Investigations over time that have adopted this methodology (along with other variables such as consumption levels) has posited the percentage of the middle-class in the Indian population anywhere between 10% and 25% (Kapur, 2010).

In spite of constituting quite a low fraction of the population since independence the middle-class has always assumed for itself the role of speaking for the entire people of India. Even when institutional structures failed in achieving their intended objectives of development or adequate redistribution of national wealth, they were defended as an essential part of middle-class existence, and hence, essential for the nation (Fernandes, 2010).

This has led to attempts to explain and understand the impact that the middle-class has on the social and political imaginary of India and its hegemonic, ideological hold. Such attempts were also precipitated by the changing composition as well as attitudes of the middle-class after the implementation of the Mandal Commission reports and the pro-market liberalization of the 1990's. The post-independence middle-class put up a display, at least on the outside, of thrift and frugality. Self-discipline and moderate consumption was encouraged in order to 'sacrifice' for the nation, and wanton displays of wealth and

consumption were considered a predilection of the unjustly rich. An austere life-style was considered a spiritual, Gandhian anti-dote to 'Western consumerism'. There was also an under-current of displays and tastes considered to be 'gawdy' as fitting only to those who are at the bottom of the social ladder. Stylized consumption and the display of it, thus, became a marker for the middle-class, as well as their status and privilege (Baviskar and Ray, 2010). The greater the savings of the middle-class, the greater the cache of the state for investment in various schemes. This social imaginary was widely in display in the Bollywood narratives of the era, with the protagonists usually hailing from rustic, rural settings, given to a simple life-style as befitting 'Indian tradition'. The 'villains' were often seen leading indulgent, opulent lives (Dwyer, 2011).

3b The post-liberalization middle-class

Post-liberalization, however, the marker of middle-class changed rapidly. Already from the 1980's onwards consumer goods had received a fillip from the government. Successful consumption in the liberalized market of goods, especially luxury products, produced both domestically and imported became the identifying marker of the middle-class. Cars, cell-phones, vacations etc. became markers of prestige and status. Consumer electronics formed a major part of this Jobs in the private sector seemed more attractive, both at home and abroad (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). The politics of governance shifted from '*roti, kapda, makaan*' to '*bijli, pani, sadak*'. Focus on welfare seemed passe for the news media, which had increasingly been dominated by the views and aspirations of the middle-class (Baviskar and Ray, 2010). This 'new middle class' (or NMC, as the scholarship had called them) seemed anxious to shed the tag of a developing society from a low to middle income country, and considered depictions of poverty to be a detraction from the potential of the nation. The media, social commentators, business leaders and politicians were publicly seen to anoint this iteration of the middle-class as the 'future' of the nation. The economic dogma shifted radically, from a protectionist, state-led economy to a free-market economy established with the state's intervention. The state was to have minimal involvement, focussed only on infrastructure construction and maintenance (as opposed to actively intervening in poverty alleviation). Moreover, such initiatives were to be led by professionals with technical expertise and with no political affiliation, rather than career

politicians who were susceptible to the lure of rent-seeking and red-tape (Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

Although it is liberalization that gets the most attention and is often the most feted of historical junctures of this period, it is the Mandal Commission's report extending affirmative action to the OBC communities that has reshaped the Indian polity. The subsequent anti-Mandal agitations by the upper castes, and brutal repression of pro-Mandal agitations that determined the political outlook of the middle-class for the subsequent three decades. The second democratic upsurge pushed issues of marginalization along the lines of caste into societal discourses. The electoral success of leaders such as Lalu Prasad Yadav, Mayawati and Mulayam Singh Yadav in the most populous provinces of the country was accompanied by more affirmative action policies in state jobs as well as in educational institutions (Baviskar and Ray, 2010). This was perceived as a threat to the prosperity of the mostly upper-caste dominated middle-class. Affirmative action also resulted in the upward mobility of the previously disenfranchised, and as more SC, ST and OBC citizens joined the public-sector as employees and administrators their share in the middle-class population started increasing. This led to contestations, and fault-lines within the middle-class stood exposed, as the political and social assertion by the marginalized castes challenged the dominance of the upper castes (Still, 2014). The percentage of non-upper caste middle-class Indian citizens could also signify their middle-class status through the same consumption practices as the others, for a fair market is supposed to ensure access to market commodities to all irrespective of ascriptive identities. These sections had traditionally been barred from partaking in many social and cultural rituals in the public and civic spheres, because customary Brahmanical hierarchies excluded them from engaging these rituals. Such barriers did not apply to the market (Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

This political assertion from below proved to be a unifying force for the upper-castes in the middle-class, who had seen their ideological hegemony and dominance over Indian social formations thwarted. Fernandes and Kapur argue against any special predilection for Hindutva among the upper caste middle-class citizens. Rather Hindutva provided a solution to the question of how to counter the assertion from below, allowing them to re-establish themselves with, as Fernandes calls it, a 'fractured hegemony'. This hegemonic bloc has

among its numbers white-collar professionals, as well as the petty bourgeoisie – those proprietors and entrepreneurs who owned property (and the means of production) but not to the extent of the bourgeoisie. The remaining faction was the one constituted by those engaged in clerical positions, as well as in positions that did not afford very high amounts of authority. These factions have been at odds with each other at times, and may have divergent interests, but in the protection of their resources and social privileges in the face of assertion from below they have united under the banner of Hindutva (Kapur, 2010) (Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

3c The contemporary middle class in practice

Fernandes further argues that this is not a pre-existing class, but a 'class-in-practice'; it is tangible and discernible while it is in operation. It zealously guards the boundaries that demarcate this class from others, through skills and literacies that are not readily available to everyone. Reading, writing and speaking English with the proper grammar, syntax, diction etc. is one of them. Certain white-collar jobs are premised on skills that are officially recognized through certification and licensing, which requires formal education in institutions that are accessible only to certain sections. This results in such education/skills remaining scarce which results in higher wages for these white-collar professionals. Such boundary-keeping is also how the middle-class reproduces itself, and caste-based social and cultural capital is a key tool in this regard. The NMC takes recourse to the discourse of 'merit' to deny the importance of affirmative action policies, and the privilege historically accrued by their caste position. Such attitudes have concretized in various political formations over the years opposed to 'reservation'(Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

To keep political assertion from below at bay, the NMC has usually deployed depoliticization, by declaring certain forms of political articulation and presence in public spaces and public spheres to be detrimental to public 'order' and hygiene. Contestations over representation, recognition and resource distribution are sought to be settled through 'civil society', institutions and processes where 'political society' finds itself severely enervated and delegitimized by social and cultural capital. Furthermore, the increased presence of non-upper castes in prominence in public spaces and loss of privilege led to a politics that was highly attuned to retaining traditional practices of purity, nostalgia for a

fictionalized, glorious past and other reactionary attitudes. Such manifestations of middle-class illiberalism as a means to regulate upheavals caused by liberalization has been seen other parts of the world as well (Fernandes, 2010) (Baviskar and Ray, 2010).

The domination of the middle-class, especially the NMC, in the 'public sphere' is often buoyed by an imaginary that removes all obstacles to smooth consumption practices that help maintain practices of taste. This is especially enabled by the colonization of the mass media and civic bodies by the NMC world-view. A slightly earlier corpus of scholarship identifies a drive for world-class lifestyles that required the more unruly denizens of public spaces, especially the marginalized such as squatters and hawkers, to vacate the spaces they occupy for shelter and livelihood in order for efficient and aesthetic circulatory paths of consumption. However, there is usually a political tussle as the denizens of these urban spaces leverage their numbers and political clout to resist these changes. Sometimes surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms are subverted by them through their intimate interactions with law-enforcement, civic bodies and government (Srivastava, 2010) apparatuses (Baviskar, 2010). Incidentally, the disenfranchised sections are usually aided in some of their political initiatives by some members of the NMC themselves through NGOs, activist networks etc. Thus, very different ideas of the 'public good' or 'public interest' are seen in conflict with one another.

In comparatively more recent inquiries, however, India's competitively populist state and central governments have been seen to have applied other modes of structuring public spheres and spaces. Rather than cater exclusively to the NMCs populist governments are seen to expand certain forms of material and aesthetic consumption towards the lower middle-classes and those below the NMCs, population groups who have hitherto been excluded from the circuits of consumption of the elites and the NMCs. Semiotic resources of various sorts, some of which are imitations of consumable commodities considered to be of 'sophisticated' taste and associated with elites, dot these public spaces. While they may be considered to be 'kitschy' or 'gawdy' by those who have access to more rarefied consumption, the demographic that is being targeted with these provisions do not care for such distinctions. These aesthetic consumption commodities are facilitated instead of any redistribution of developmental goods or urban public infrastructure. The image of the

populist politician is often prominently associated with these provisions, and there are authoritarian possibilities associated with this set-up. For instance, if the opposition attempts to remove resources for such consumable displays towards more welfare-oriented goals it would be seen as making such goods inaccessible for the masses, signalling a return to elitism (Dasgupta, 2021).

Mediascapes, especially cinema, provide us with a vignette of the hegemonic aspirations and discourses in a social formation. Such mediascapes may also be internally variegated, with unacknowledged schisms reflected in different genres of mediated content that contend with each other. India's most prominent cinematic brand, Bollywood, has hosted the hegemonic vision of the NMCs in the past three decades in different manifestations. Rather than the promotion of austerity, popular film-making companies such as Yash Raj Films and Mukta Arts portrayed through their films a desire for consumption and mobility. This was especially aimed at the upcoming New Middle Classes, the upper caste ones to be specific (the struggles of the non-upper castes who have made it to the middle classes were rarely portrayed). The protagonists need no longer have humble backgrounds as one of the *toiling masses* as the middle-class started to become the default stand-point. The story-lines especially celebrated the growing audience of relatively well-off Non-Resident Indians abroad, and the diasporic audience became a major target demographic. Of course, there was always a segment of cinema that was specifically targeted towards those below the middle-class lines. Such films usually had boisterous plot elements and performances that were considered too kitschy, gawdy or 'crass' by more upmarket audiences. With time the message of the self-made protagonist that takes on 'old-fashioned' mores and a corrupt, labyrinthine establishment dominated by the antiquated state gathered even more steam. A landmark film in this direction was the film 'Guru' by Mani Ratnam, which was based loosely on the life of Dhirubhai Ambani, founder of the Reliance industries. Bollywood's output has always had a loose nationalistic tone, and the 'villains' in 'patriotic' movies always had had a heavy Muslim accent, signalling Pakistan. But this was always tempered (before 2014) by the fact that there was significant revenue to be earned by these films in West Asian countries. Though the tone of a lot of these movies was triumphant, especially in the face of an adverse establishment, societal hierarchies and status quo was rarely ever subverted. This new breed of Bollywood films often celebrated conservative family

structures and norms, and this generation of film-makers such as Karan Johar often made films that were relatively even more conservative than earlier generations. It is interesting, though, that the films that were made for the NMCs dealing with 'social issues', or questioned dominant 'norms' that often disadvantaged the under-privileged, often did not find a mass audience. Such movies were usually reserved for the new multiplexes that have mushroomed in urban areas that are frequented by the relatively well-off. The popular audiences either sought out regional cinema, or Bollywood fare that catered to their taste. While the popularity of such films flies in the face of middle-class distaste, they do not challenge prevalent norms, whether of marriage or inter-gender relationships (Dwyer, 2011).

Hindutva nationalism brought all of these political tendencies - proponents of liberal free-market policies, religious-social conservatives under the umbrella of Hindutva nationalism.

4 The electoral formation

An investigation of the nature of the online publics that have been evoked and mobilised by the images of Modi, Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi online necessitates an understanding of the electorate that propelled them to power. The latter might hold some explanatory potential regarding the hegemonic ideological co-ordinates that has bound these online publics together. There might be, for instance, significant overlaps between the offline and online factors that amplified the appeal of Narendra Modi. As shall be discussed below it remains contested whether it is the policy positions or welfare disposition of Modi that has garnered him landslide victories and impregnable popularity, or whether it was the ideological co-ordinates, desires and promises embedded in his image (visual and otherwise) that turned the tides in his favour.

Scholars have opined that even when the rest of the country was slowly warming to the idea of Narendra Modi as a Prime Ministerial candidate he had already switched into full campaign mode. Following his victory in the 2012 Gujarat elections in 2012 (the 4th in a row) the very first public address was in Hindi. This seemed to indicate that he had a national audience in mind that was willing to hear the narrative he wanted to propagate. To sway the electorate in his favour the BJP had also deployed its formidable organizational

structure on the ground that promoted Modi as someone who would usher in a paradigm shift from erstwhile governments (Palshikar, Lodha and Kumar, 2017). For the 2014 elections the image that was being pushed at the electorate was of a masterful technocrat who embodied the aspirational nature of middle-class Indian values while also being strong on internal and external security (Sircar, 2021). The welfare policies of the erstwhile Congress government were framed as indulgent, patronage-based 'doles' given out to India's underprivileged, marks of a regime riven with rent-seeking behaviour manifested in several infamous, extraordinary cases of graft. 'Empowerment', instead, would be what a government under Modi would bring about, it was said. The media and business-industrial circles warmed to his pro-market outlook. Some liberal commentators also appeared hopeful (Verma and Chibber, 2017). In an interview with a couple of young urban, upper caste, upper middle-class women conducted as a part of another research the respondents said that they had seen Modi's rise reflected on Facebook around this time (around 2012). For them, Modi had seemingly managed to generate significant interest from the mostly young and middle-class Facebook users in India. They had even had a tussle with an ardent supporter. As this discussion progresses, we shall increasingly dwell upon the hegemonic role played by the middle-class.

4a Disaggregation of support for Modi

The disaggregation of Modi's voter-base for the 2014 elections gives us an idea of the manner in which different aspects of Modi's appeal converged among Indian voters. The BJP has always had its stable and significant support base among the upper caste and upper classes, especially so among the Hindus. The states that had always been its traditional strongholds are northern states such as Uttar Pradesh. The higher one's level of education, wealth, social stratum, the more likely is one to be a votary for the BJP, election data from 2014 revealed (Palshikar, Lodha and Kumar, 2017). That a voting bloc was forming along majoritarian lines was not very apparent to observers at this point, as the buzzword of 'development' and 'governance' overshadowed the less savoury parts of the Sangh's political outlook (Vaishnav and Hinston, 2019). However, the Modi campaign has time and again successfully reached beyond its core constituency of upper-castes, upper class and middle classes to appeal to other caste and community groups – the OBC, the SC and the

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ST communities, which together constitute the Bahujan, almost 70% of India's population. In fact, it has secured more votes from these population groups than the Congress and its allies in the last two elections of 2019 and 2014. The same applies to those belonging to the lower end of the wealth hierarchy. This might appear surprising, given the dim view of welfarism that the Modi campaign had repeatedly projected, contrasting it to 'development'. The state's role in economy and society was to be minimized ('minimum government, maximum governance') for efficiency and to prevent rent-seeking behaviour. The flagship welfare programs of the previous government (such as MGNREGA) had come under significant attack (Verma and Chibber, 2017). An important metric that explains the electorate's agreement with this view is the fact that only 20% of respondents who were beneficiaries of the UPA government's welfare measures credited the government at the centre for being facilitators of these schemes, data from the National Election Studies 2014 shows (Palshikar, 2017). These were also well-reflected in the news media discourses of the time, as well as in discourses on social media platforms. In the course of this discussion it would be quite illuminating to see how hegemonic middle-class values and narratives are, and how this translates into Indian online spaces. In addition to the Smart-phones and internet connectivity had increased among the marginalized sections since 2013-14, especially with the downward pricing war that had started after Jio entered the Telecom market. One also sees a more assertive presence of Dalit Bahujan and Adivasi citizens on social media than in 2014 (Kumbhojkar, 2018).

Part of the strategic appeal created with Modi's image was that he was a leader more interested in nation-building rather than drawing on 'parochial' affiliations such as caste for votes and support. His carefully manicured image of a being a poor tea-seller's son who also belonged to an OBC community was designed within the familiar frame-work of the aspirational Indian climbing up the social ladder through hard work, rather than being a challenge to the caste order. This was well in line with the values that under-pinned his campaign. However, when it came to election politicking the BJP used caste cleavages well to its advantages. This is happening against the backdrop of changing caste dynamics. In the immediate post-independence period, individual castes or 'jatis' were appealed to and treated as singular entities. With the 'first democratic upsurge', as Yogendra Yadav had termed it, of the 1960's the collective categories of OBC, SC and ST assumed greater

electoral clout. This rising recognition of the numerical strength in the *varna* over *jati* coalesced into the parties such as the RJD, the SP and the BSP in the post-Mandal era with the objective of achieving goals of social justice (Vaishnav and Hinston, 2019). However, the Modi campaign fractured the power bases of parties such as the SP and the BSP. The Yadavs, an OBC community, are recognized to be the primary support base and beneficiaries of the SP in UP while the Jatavs, an SC community, serve the same function for the BSP. The BJP managed to array other, more marginalized OBC and SC communities that had some grievances against the SP and the BSP governments against these two parties. BJP's massive mandate was in no small part because they managed to attract votes from OBC, SC and ST communities, although their principal vote bank are the upper castes and upper classes. In fact, they obtained more votes from these communities than the Congress party did in 2014 and 2019, which is the inverse of usual trends. In addition to cutting across caste lines, Modi's success also cut across regional boundaries (Verma and Chibber, 2017). The opposition was roundly demolished in the Northern, Central and Western regions along with the Union Territories. In addition, the Modi campaign made significant inroads in states such as West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Mizoram, significantly raising the percentage of votes it received. The nation-wide recognition and support for Modi online is well-reflected here (Palshikar, Lodha and Kumar, 2017).

For Verma and Chibber[157], two of the broadest and most conspicuous ideological axes along which forces of attraction were drawing people to Modi were – (i) social conservativism (ii) pro-market reforms. While social conservatives have traditionally been voters of the BJP, the pro-market reformist sections were drawn to the persona of Modi created during the campaigns, especially the promises to rein in the allegedly profligate spending by Congress's welfarism (Verma and Chibber, 2017). An overwhelming section of these pro-market votaries would not have voted for the BJP had Modi not been the Prime Ministerial candidate (Shastri and Syal, 2017). Modi's track record as Chief Minister served as a significant selling point – 'Gujarat model' – especially in terms of economic growth and

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[157] Chibber and Verma's principal argument is that ideologically driven decision making supersedes patron-client relationships in Indian electoral politics. The central ideological point of difference for them is the role of the state in society and economy – those that support and those that are opposed to state intervention. Contemporary Indian conservatism for them is based upon those that are opposed to the state making provisions for minorities and affirmative action for the marginalized.

industrial and market investments. However, a closer scrutiny of the data shows that its human development indicators were quite poor, and other states had had enjoyed more investment (Chhibber and Ostermann, 2014).

This transformation into a Presidential-style electoral contest has been a major factor in Indian politics, as has been discussed in earlier chapters. The BJP and the Congress both have tried to bring the 'leadership issue' to the centre-stage very forcefully in the past three elections. The BJP tried it with Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2004 and L. K. Advani in 2009 too, but perfected it with Modi in 2014 (Sircar, 2020). Manmohan Singh was successfully projected in 2009 owing to the track record of UPA I. However, Rahul Gandhi was behind Modi by as much as twenty percentage points in terms of approval among the electorate (Palshikar, Lodha and Kumar, 2017). The overwhelming centrality of Modi's image is apparent when one considers that around a quarter of the electorate would not have voted for the BJP's candidates had it not been for Modi (Shastri and Syal, 2017).

The Modi regime was swept into power with much fanfare winning 282 out of 543 seats, being the first government to come to power with a complete majority since 1984. It won over 31% of all the votes cast, while the coalition it led pushed the vote percentage in their favour over 38% (Palshikar, Lodha and Kumar, 2017) (Vaishnav and Hinston, 2019).

4b The majoritarian dimension

The Hindutva-majoritarian aspect of the BJP and the larger Sangh took a back-seat in most analyses of the 2014 campaign as issues of development, corruption and economy were given centre-stage (Palshikar, 2021). The market responded positively to the Modi regime, as measures such as alteration of India's labour laws were taken. There was a slew of initiatives that were heralded with considerable fanfare such as 'Make in India', 'Digital India' etc. and the image of Modi was intimately associated with them. India jumped to the 77th rank of the Ease of Doing Business index from 125th. However, economic growth was nowhere near as impressive as it had been promised by the Modi government. GDP growth rates remained below the stratospheric expectations. Although Modi's image remained unscathed even after there were numerous reports of sufferings and negative impacts due to the implementation of demonetization and the GST regime of taxation (Sircar, 2020). An

NSSO report from 2017-18, that the regime allegedly sought to suppress keeping in mind the upcoming General Elections, said that unemployment was at a 45-year old high[158]. Agrarian product prices were at a two-decade low in 2018-19 according to government data, a result of lowered inflation[159]. Failing crops and demands for loan waivers led to farmers from Tamil Nadu protesting in the national capital in 2017 with tactics that forced the media and other citizens to pay attention to them[160].

The social, cultural and political realms saw significant turbulence during the first 5 years of the Modi-regime. Some have called it the dawn of a new 'political system'. From a more federalized polity a more centralized administration emerged, with the power of regional parties as allies considerably reduced, although nominally it was a National Democratic 'Alliance' that is in power (Ziegfeld, 2020). Political competition across the board has reduced considerably, too. The number of OBC and SC MPs reduced compared to earlier years, as did the number of Muslim MPs (Vaishnav and Hinston, 2019).

The centralization of power and decision-making also had a deleterious effect on various democratic institutional systems essential to India's democracy (Manor, 2021). The Prime Minister's image, both literally and metaphorically, was associated so strongly with development and welfare initiatives that it largely overshadowed the role of Chief Ministers and state administrators. This is especially the case with Chief Ministers such as Shivraj Singh Chauhan of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh and Nitish Kumar of the JD(U), BJP's alliance partner in Bihar. Both of them had won re-elections based on their welfare and development track record. Now, however, they have had to find alternative platforms for appealing to the electorate (Sircar, 2021). This political ecology is more suitable for CMs such as Ajay Singh Bisht of UP, who is known more for his polarizing rhetoric, over-zealous carceral and punitive measures vis-à-vis law-and-order, mobilisation along

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[158]https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/unemployment-rate-at-five-decade-high-of-6-1-in-2017-18-nsso-survey-119013100053_1.html, https://www.newsclick.in/Statistical-Jugglery-Should-not-Conceal-Worsening-Unemployment-Scenario
[159] https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/worst-price-slump-in-18-years-shows-scale-of-farm-crisis/story-P2niBeuqAcaxgms3HmFCTK.html
[160] https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/tamil-nadu-farmers-protesting-at-jantar-mantar-eat-own-excreta-threaten-to-eat-human-flesh/story-tMOsu6Og6EBN3eADCCkapO.html

communal lines and his Thakur caste identity etc., rather than welfare measures (Palshikar, 2021).

4c Shifts after 2014

There was a conspicuous shift in position and policy by the regime with regard to the economy. The enthusiasm and eagerness to pro-market solutions abated with poor results by the BJP in a few state elections and there was a marked shift towards the provision of welfare services to rural and marginalized population sections (Deshpande, Tillin and Kailash, 2019). Although the rhetoric over self-entrepreneurship continued unabated, this was a significant departure from the middle-class (or 'neo-middle class') oriented rhetoric that sought 'empowerment' over 'doles' and a generally decreased role of the state in society. Most of the flagship welfare schemes of the Modi regime were continuations from the UPA government, and had actually been started by them (Sircar, 2021). But these schemes were brought directly under the control of the Prime Minister's Office, and all of them bore a trace of the PM himself, with either the PM's name or image prominently displayed with the products of the scheme. Due to the intense centralization, ministerial levels were largely bypassed and the agency of bureaucrats was severely curtailed in order to exercise direct control of the welfare provisions, which negatively affected these institutional set-ups as well the delivery of welfare goods. However, the schemes were ramped up to an extent that there were large scale advertisement campaigns (with the PM prominently displayed) and there were significantly more citizens who were included as beneficiaries, even though they might not have enjoyed the end-product. For instance, Jan Dhan accounts were opened for many economically marginalized citizens but the account balance remained zero (Manor, 2021) (Aiyar, 2019).

It is important to discern how the larger publics that had gravitated towards Modi are a result of the hegemonic ideology of Hindutva nationalism, welfare provisioning and personalized politics. Almost all of the flagship programs of the regime were geared towards providing private goods for households such as cooking gas cylinders, toilets etc. rather than public goods such as education. A lot of these schemes had the prefix PM – such as *Prime Minister's Awas Yojana* or *Prime Minister's Jan Dhan Yojana* (Aiyar, 2019). Scholars have opined that this has established a direct, 'visceral' relationship between the

beneficiaries and the Prime Minister, who is credited as the one providing the provisions. This has happened to the extent that not even the government or the BJP is credited (the UPA, as has been mentioned before, had received very little credit for welfare provisioning during its reign). Such is the PR campaign that even those citizens had not received the benefits yet are hopeful that their turn shall soon come, just like their neighbours. This has also allowed Modi to ask people to vote for him directly, with the local BJP candidate being a mere go-between – each vote given to the local candidate creates the bulwark for Modi's victory (Sircar, 2021). Before elections grassroots level works of the BJP campaigned based on all the goods provided by Modi to the local beneficiaries (Vaishnav and Hinston, 2019).

The picture has been by no means rosy, as the episode of demonetisation had shown. However, even the deleterious after-effects of demonetisation, especially in the informal and self-employed sector failed to mar the intricate image-work of the PM that had come to permeate the Indian electorate. The narrative was turned around to portray the PM as an intrepid, decisive leader who dared to take on graft and special interests in Indian institutions through demonetization. Such instances force us to consider the limits of a purely political-economic analysis; the decidedly less-than-stellar economic performance cannot be the basis for the massive mandate that the incumbent Prime Minister received in 2019 (Manor, 2021).

4d The perfect storm

As opposed to a politics of 'vikas' alone where electoral mandates are considered as a response to the achievement of economic and governance goals promised to the voters, Nilanjan Sircar asks us to consider the politics of 'vishwas', 'based on the personal popularity of Narendra Modi, and the trust that voters have placed in him'. He cites research that strongly argues for a model of understanding electoral choices wherein popular, charismatic leaders are allowed to 'frame' issues such as development, national security, even the nation itself, and what imperils it (Sircar, 2020). Scholars have wondered if responses to survey questions that seem to indicate economic indicators as determinant to voting behaviour may have been citing welfare and economic measures post facto, after the choice in favour had already been made. The affective investment in the leader is prior to the issues themselves. This aspect again fore-grounds the questions that are key to this

research – the image-work of the leader and the impact it has. The desire to have a 'strong' leader with unilateral, centralized decision-making powers was already detectable from surveys conducted during the heydays of alliance politics at the national level in the 1990's and 2000's (Palshikar, 2021).

Where welfare politics imprints very strongly onto Hindutva majoritarian nationalist politics is in the groundwork laid for the electoral triumph of the BJP by activist organizations and networks that have been operational across the nation for years and decades. Activists of such groups have been operating in remote areas of the country, with a largely depoliticized approach on the surface, providing welfare services where the state has historically failed. This brings them into daily contact with constituents who would otherwise not fall into BJP's core voter base of urban, educated, upper-class and upper-caste citizens. Because there seems to be no overt political agenda to such work beneficiaries do not consider this to be a part of usual clientelist or patronage politics, and tends to be more amenable to conversation, trust and persuasion. Such activities yield rich dividends for Sangh-affiliated parties come elections (Thachil, 2011). This service-based approach that does not immediately seem to be associated with politics is seen with other religious-nationalist political formations in other parts of the world, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle-East and the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The extent to which Hindu nationalism is integral to the appeal of the Modi image-work remains contested and open to speculation, and survey data might be misleading; its role might be more important than has been previously thought. Palashikar argues that conflating Hindutva with ethno-nationalism would be misleading, and prefers majoritarianism as the conceptual framework that allows us to analyse the quilting together of a plurality of identities (sometimes conflicting) under the umbrella of Hindutva. The tendencies for Hindu majoritarianism had already been present in the electorate even as far back as 2004 when the UPA I regime had just started, as Palshikar shows (Palshikar, 2021). The BJP's victorious campaign rested upon an ideological lynchpin that managed to convince voters that Hindutva majoritarianism and nationalism shared the same goals. While Hindutva may draw the allegiance of only a section of the population, the affective attachment of the electorate to the idea of the nation is far stronger. Hindutva nationalism

forms quite potent mixture when paired with populism, which Modi and the BJP has done successfully by painting any opposing voices as enemies of the state and 'people'. Opposition parties are regularly sought to be de-legitimized, and 'Congress-mukt Bharat' has often come to mean 'Vipaksh-mukt Bharat. It has become par of course to describe opposition parties, politicians and those opposed to the regime in terms of 'snakes', 'rats' etc (Manor, 2021).

5 Memetic publics on the battle-fields of history

An investigation of the comments section of the fig. 6 in the third chapter reveals a boisterous, sometimes belligerent field of users.

In fact, the comments section accompanying this meme features repeated exhortations to 'read' or 're-read history' from various stand-points. Several commenters, while being ambivalent towards Gandhi, point out that Gandhi was not the architect of the two-nation theory, and it's wrong to blame him for the same (his other flaws notwithstanding).

Chauhan ji - Thoda history ka paath padhaiye yaha junta ko.

People in recent years claims that Gandhi ji is opposite to what it was said about him .. why ?? And how ?? You guys need to read the books of scholars of that time .. the social media is defaming him and people are always like they were believe blindly on anything ... Why no opposition or his hater never came forward to speak against him that time and why now...

Like · Reply · 4y

👍 1

Gandhiji never approved separate nation on the basis of religion.

Like · Reply · 4y

👍😂 6

I said the same thing above bro, but thanks for reiterating.

Like · Reply · 4y

👍 1

Sarkari school se ho? Itihaas nahi Padhe ho kya?

Like · Reply · See Translation · 4y · Edited

There's a fair amount of ridicule directed at one's opponents, with an air of superiority (as seen in the comment above that mocks someone as being educated in a government school). A commenter who had used 'Hindu' as a surname or second name repeatedly cites statistics and incidents of communal attacks on Hindus by Muslims as proof of the necessity of a Hindu India (as Pakistan became an Islamic state). This commenter, along with many others, considers Gandhi to have wilfully failed at protecting these Hindus. The discourse in operation here can, at one register, be read as a the formation of an 'issue public'[161] – users coalesce around stand-points on controversial issues through online social networks in these spaces, and contend with opponents. However, these sectarian formations can't be said to be confined to online spaces alone, and are part of an entire constellation of views regarding the nation, religion and belonging, and have an after-life beyond interactions on social media spaces.

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[161] See Marres, N. and Rogers, R., 2005. Recipe for Tracing the Fate of Issues and their Publics on the Web, Marres, N., 2005. Issues spark a public into being: A key but often forgotten point of the Lippmann-Dewey debate. *Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy*, pp.208-217 and Marres, N., 2015. Why map issues? On controversy analysis as a digital method. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, *40*(5), pp.655-686.
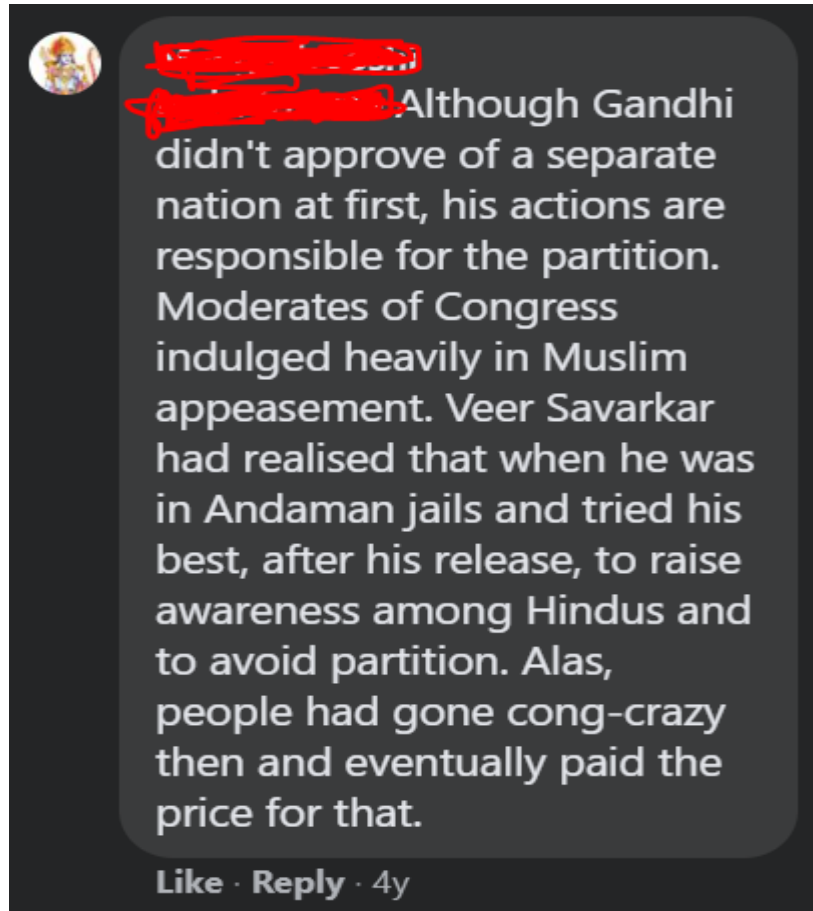
Several commenters eschewed discussions of history and launched vitriol at Gandhi, using the choicest vitriol in Hindi that is usually sexually explicit/gendered. Some glorified Nathuram Godse, his assassin, with clever puns and word-play. The element of 'fun',

playfulness and sarcasm were at play in several comments, even while dealing with matters with the gravest of consequences. Vituperative humour at the expense of a hated figure (Gandhi/Nehru) or one's opponent is a dividend yielded by the public sections of social media posts.
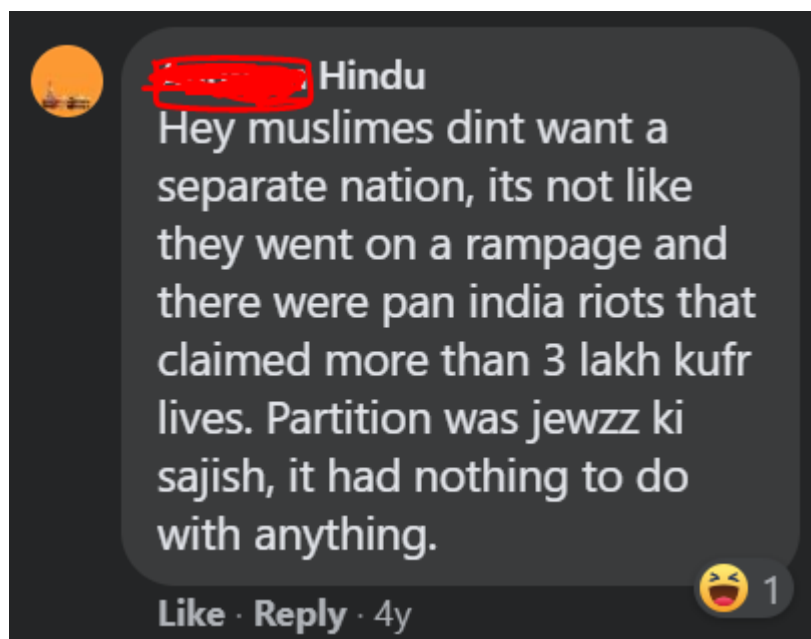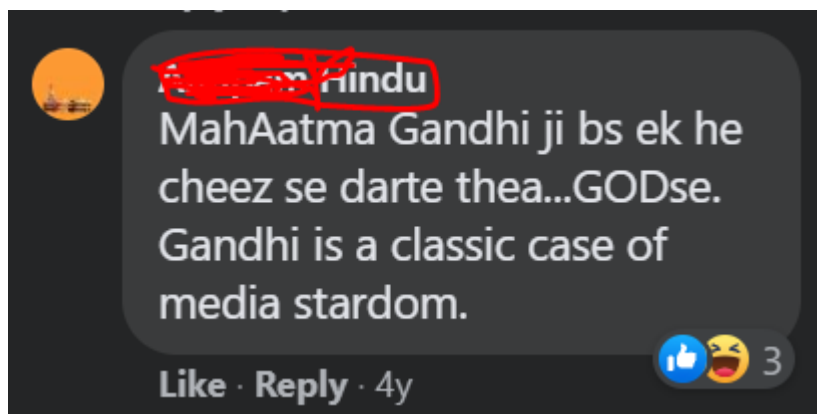
In 38 of the 336 comments following the post, one can see signs of a dialogue with users replying to each other either in agreement or disagreement. A full 100 of the 336 were in response to another comment and were part of a thread, which is nearly 30% of the comments, thus showing significant signs of trialogic engagement.

Similarly, in Fig. 8, the meme from the third chapter, there are 42 tweets in response to the main tweet.

Several of them carry the same vein of sarcasm and satire, while others are more earnest in their criticism from various stand-points. Some criticized the tweet itself in satirical terms for its alleged 'pseudo-secularism'.
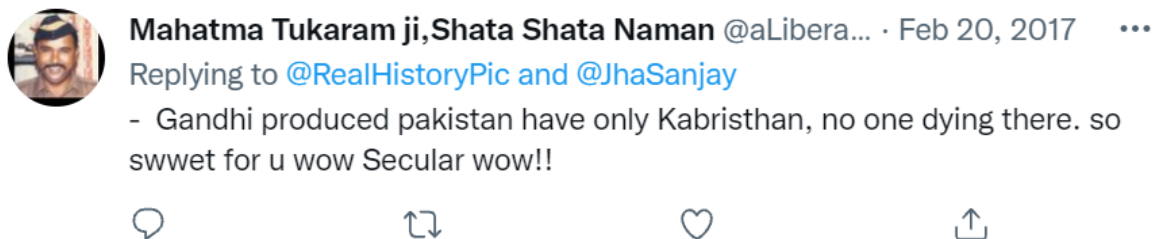
A few of the responders used satirical and memetic images of their own.

It is not always easy to discern if the intent or effect behind a post or tweet is political criticism or just an attempt at humour. As Ryan Milner puts it:

> 'Some memetic texts may be mere pastiche. Some may be poignant commentary. Some….may flirt with both. Some may be neither, but rather may do their "recycling" for reasons entirely outside of any critical, political edge…..'

Political, social and playful purposes exist simultaneously in these images' (Milner, 2016: 70-73)"

6 The public sphere

In the years since Habermas had floated the idea of a public, it has been historicized to a considerable extent. The conceptualization of publics, whether in the offline or online context, owes considerably to Nancy Fraser's re-formulation of the postulates put forward by Habermas in his 'Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere'. Instead of a

homogenous, bourgeois public sphere, Fraser is insistent upon the existence of multiple 'publics', capable of deliberating upon issues that might have implications for a large majority of people but also often locked in conflictual relationships. A plurality of publics exists because it not possible to 'bracket' socio-economic differences, and this plurality is a structural condition rather than being a deviance in a liberal democracy. These 'publics' are overall beneficial to a democratic milieu. Fraser's principal pre-occupation is the need to account for socio-economic hierarchies that results in differential access to 'publicity' of cultural expression, social identity etc. Fraser calls such public spheres that exist in opposition to the dominant, hegemonic bourgeois ones as 'subaltern counterpublics'. Such counterpublics can also be the sites of exclusion and discrimination themselves. Fraser classifies publics as 'weak' and 'strong' publics based on whether they merely present opinions or have decision making powers (Fraser, 1990).

The public sphere is an amalgamation of many conversations, debates, discussions etc. Localized concerns are contained in it, and may rise to prominence one day, while the next day an entirely different topic may come into the limelight. In being a 'meta space' for the discussion of topics of common concern to many, the public sphere shares similarities with two other hallmarks of modernity – the market and the state (Taylor, 2002). The public sphere involves not just face-to-face gatherings and discussions but also mediated ones through technological media. What is required is a sense among a large group of people that there are strangers very much like themselves ('like me') who are being addressed by a particular discursive artifact (Warner, 2002). The artifacts' form and content change and diversify over time and space, as does the scope of its reach. This is a sphere that (ideally) is supposed to be independent of the polity, and acts as a mechanism of scrutiny on the polity (Taylor, 2002).

6a The cyber public sphere

The internet is sometimes seen as an extension of the public sphere where free, rational individuals engage in deliberation through inter-subjective language to arrive at a consensus on the truth. As discussed above, there exists a critique of the concept of public sphere for excluding the voices emanating from the margins. This critique posits the existence of 'counter-publics' which seems to have tremendous explanatory potential in the globalized

communications sphere of the internet (Dean, 2003). Global networks of telecommunication which enable computer-mediated interaction among these pluralized 'publics' are usually considered 'universal, anti-hierarchical' that offer 'universal access, uncoerced communication'[162]. However, this sphere of the publics runs the risk of being a disavowed fantasy that co-constitutes the plane of modern informational and 'communicative' capitalism.

It remains a matter of debate whether the proliferation of communicative means such as social media platforms and chat messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram has engendered publics that are deliberative in nature or has led to mobs and other riotous and violent collectives. Such collectives formed around images, especially morphed images, have led to a spate of riots in India in this decade. The Azad Maidan riots of 2012, the Pune riots of 2014 and the Muzaffarpur riots of 2015 are just some instances of such developments. In each of these cases images received over messaging platforms were the catalyst for violence to break out; in the case of the Azad Maidan riots it was doctored images and videos from Myanmar that led to the riots. Facebook images that allegedly defamed Maharashtrian historical figures such as Shivaji and Sambhaji were responsible for the Pune riots. The Muzaffarpur riots were precipitated by videos of lynchings from Pakistan that were falsely claimed to be Indian (Narrain, 2017) (Udupa, 2017). The collectives formed around such images seem to be driven by an expanded 'geography of affect', with national boundaries being deterritorialized by the circulation of these images (images and videos from Pakistan and Burma leading to riots in India). The trans-individual bonds that lead to such collectives to emerge are informed by histories of communal suspicion and trust in the unofficial networks of circulation, which is contrasted with distrust in the official mass media (Udupa, 2017). The response of the Indian state has been in the form of a slew of legal and legislative measures aimed at maintaining 'public order' by curbing the circulation of such inflammatory morphed images. However, civil society initiatives have also led to the formation of nascent publics that have attempted to scrutinize and verify such morphed images and stop their further transmission (Narrain, 2017).

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[162] Buchstein, H. (1997) 'Bytes that Bite: The Internet and Deliberative Democracy', *Constellations, Vol. 4, No. 2*

Dana Boyd has argued that sites such as social networking platforms lead to the formation of collectives or 'networked publics'. The architecture of social networking sites give rise to people who are connected through networks, people who have the potential to form 'imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice', people with a 'connected presence' who operate in the open, or in 'public' so to speak (Boyd, 2011). Such 'public' or 'publics' may be formed not just in the Habermasian manner, or through a shared text alone, but may also be formed through the consumption and production of online cultural objects such as memes and the shared discourses and practices around them.

These online 'networked publics' formed around online cultural objects and practices (such as memes) may be of political salience[163]. Memes featuring political leaders are often commentaries on contemporary policies and political issues. Like many other online content, such memes are a mixture of 'opinion, fact and emotion', and have the potential to invigorate political engagement online (Milner, 2016).

Online publics and counter-publics have been studied thus far with an emphasis on issues of social justice and subordinated, non-dominant groups. Jackson and Welles looks into the hijacking of '#myNYPD' on Twitter and the subsequent formation of a 'networked counterpublic' that presented a counter-narrative to the mainstream and highlighted the brutality faced by peoples of colour at the hands of the police in the US (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015). Others have contended with dichotomies such as 'public-private' and 'publics-audiences'; Sonia Livingstone's work is often cited to argue that audiences are not merely passive consumers but can be a collective with political potency[164]. Salter and Blodgett have situated their work in a tradition of feminist investigation that interrogates masculine domination of online spaces. Their work revolves around the feminist counter-publics that form in online gaming cultures that contest misogyny and exclusion in these male dominated spheres (Salter and Blodgett, 2012). The manifestations of such publics and counterpublics may often have varying degrees of political engagement, and some of

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[163] See Papacharissi, Z. and de Fatima Oliveira, M. (2012) 'Affective news and networked publics: The rhythms of news storytelling on# Egypt', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 62, no. 2, pp. 266-282.
[164] See Baym, N.K. and Boyd, D. (2012) 'Socially mediated publicness: An introduction', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 320-329.

the scholarship on online publics has looked into this. Such scholarship is often seen to take a cue from Nancy Fraser's distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' publics with regard to their opinion formation and decision making capabilities, as well as David Dayan's distinction between mundane-publics, issue-publics and counter-publics based on their supposed political efficacy. Shklovski and Valtysson, in their study of online publics in Kazakhstan formed under a strict regime of censorship, depart from rigid distinctions between cultural and political publics and argue for the potential for the political that may lie embedded in supposedly 'weak' online publics (Shklovski and Valtysson, 2012).

Scholars have argued that such 'networked publics' may be populist in nature, linked to the mannerisms and symbolisms of political leaders. However, counter-publics can be formed in opposition; contrary to Nancy Fraser, however, such a counter-public is not always likely to composed solely of sub-alterns but of varied interest groups (a resultant of the 'endless heterogenity' of the population as well as 'competitive populism'). Such counter-publics may well use the social media output disseminated by official accounts associated with the politicians, which are linked to the formation of a populist public, as a 'counter-archive' from which material to be satirized and criticized can be drawn (Sinha, 2017).

Scholars have also focused on the publics that come into being through the production, circulation and consumption of visual artifacts online. Lindtner, Dourish et al. utilize Michael Warner's theorisation on emergent, reflexive publics incipient around texts to posit that there is a possibility of heterogenous publics emerging when shared visual practices are performed on a common online platform that gives rise to a collective aesthetic. Such publics do not simply coalesce around the production of a text; through the circulation of the texts and the discourses surrounding it online, the recognition by those consuming the text that there are others 'like me' being addressed and the adherence to and transgression of aesthetic norms publics are emergent[165]. When it comes to memetic visual texts in India, Assa Doron has found in his investigation of the memes derived from 'Adarsh Balak' (Ideal Boy) posters that the collectives that are formed around theses memes can often have a very pronounced middle-class orientation. Such anonymous (in the sense of being simple,

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[165] See Lindtner, S., Chen, J., Hayes, G.R. and Dourish, P. (2011) 'Towards a framework of publics: Re-encountering media sharing and its user', *ACM Trans. Comput.-Hum. Interact.* , vol. 18, no. 2, June.

generic and consequently hard to identify) collectives are often not engaged in an attempt to effect political transformation but are engaged in symbolic communicative actions online (Doron, 2016b).

7 The evolution of the 'public'

At the foundation of these notions of the 'private' and the 'public' lies the concept of the private citizen, or rather, the individual whose relationship to the private property they own is inviolable, a concept that arose under certain material conditions in the Occident. The idea of the 'private' as relating to the personhood of an individual, an interior region of plenitude, was mixed up with the idea of property being 'private', as well as there being a spaced that could be delineated and separated as 'private' (Lasén and Gómez-Cruz, 2009). The potency of the high modernist notion of privacy lay not only in what is hidden from the eyes of the rest of society (family life, homestead etc.) but also in a public performance of this secrecy (the same goes for governments and other powerful entities) (Herzfeld, 2009). Privacy and publicity seem to exist in conjunction, and one cannot be defined without considering the other. However, online spaces, especially social media platforms, challenge the older notions of the private and the public. Certain aspects of this structural shift have been part of the discussion on selfies in the preceding chapter. Privacy in online spaces has come to mean to exercise control of 'who knows what about you'. This is especially significant given the discourses of empowerment associated with the display of the self, in an overall environment of 'context collapse', where one often has to struggle to regulate the audience for one's content. There is a constant negotiation and tussle for establishing and pushing the boundaries of what constitutes an acceptable 'presentation of the self in everyday life' online (Lasén and Gómez-Cruz, 2009).

Such 'presentations of the self' have evolved in different trajectories in various social formations, and the historicized interrogation of Habermas started by Nancy Fraser has been continued by other scholars working on the Global South. The economistic 'methodological individualism' on which the generic notion of publicity and privacy has often been based has been found to be severely wanting in discussing public politics and public collectives in much of the 'rest of the world'. Scholars working in amending these concepts have repeatedly warned us time and again that the structural conditions that have enabled the

Habermasian concept of the public sphere have often been neglected in discussions (Cody, 2011). It is not solely because the White bourgeoise with private property was the lynchpin of this model; this model privileges certain modes of reception and articulation over others - cognition and visual reading. There is a certain sense of abstracted, disembodied presence in this model of public-ness, and this condition is then universalized. But this negatively affects those participants who are marked by their bodies, which has historically been the case with women and other communities (Hirschkind, 2009).

7a Beyond the West

Both Burchell[166] and Hirschkind strongly argue to take into account other forms of more corporeal, 'visceral', modes of public perception of visual, aural and written texts. Rather than being an exercise in detached rationality, such perceptions are also linked to localized forms of enjoyment, leisure, languor etc. Such modes might present itself as 'incitement' (to political action), while for those involved it might be a normalized form mobilisation to form a collective. Hirschkind considers an expansive definition of the 'political', which involves not just attempts to influence the formulation of policy and electoral concerns but also particular modes of existence as a collective wherein public agency is made possible. His conceptual model seeks to create space for the intermingled articulation of religion and politics; for Hirschkind the binary of secular-religious does not apply, especially to societies in the global South[167]. Religiosity also rams down the barrier keeping it out of the liberal public sphere, especially given its proven potency as a means to mobilise populations. Rather than the secular foundations of the modern public sphere, such a politics claims to derive its legitimacy from a 'transcendental' sovereignty (Cody, 2011). This leads to the interrogation of another binary that is taken for granted, private-public, and the affairs that are usually considered private are deemed to be under the prescription and proscription of religious oversight (Hirschkind, 2009).

Rather than being restricted to only newspapers or books, which require some degree of formal literacy, popular modes of publicity may be more oriented towards public speeches,

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[166] See Burchell, David. 1995. "The Attributes of Citizens: Virtue, Manners, and the Activity of Citizenship, Economy and Society 24 (4): 540-58

[167] Hirschkind cites Burchell to argue that the Enlightenment citizen that partook in the public sphere shaped themselves through practices of 'ethical self-discipline' derived from Christianity.

posters, cut-outs, viral audio and video clips etc. It might also involve the reading out of vernacular newspapers in tea stalls, for instance. Francis Cody's long engagement with Tamil public politics shows us that oratory is a principal medium of political communication in this part of the sub-continent[168]. Here, the illocutionary force comes not from the argument alone, but a hearkening back to a rhetorical style that evokes the classical Tamil era, which has tremendous affective and binding force on the audience. The entire field of the political rally/meeting serves an infrastructural role, with many murals, posters and so on. It is a marked departure from the more austere, Gandhian aesthetic, and is more in tune with the robust, anti-Brahmin style of Periyar. The fact that M. Karunanidhi and C. Annadurai, stalwarts of the Dravidian movement, were screen-writers for Tamil films helped their cause even more. Indeed, this rhetorical style has proven most effective in mobilising non-Brahmin intermediate castes as a powerful electoral bloc that have driven the Dravidian parties towards much success. It is not without its limits, as classical Tamil stylings did have a gendered aspect, and leaders who sought to make a name for themselves as action-oriented would occasionally pepper their speeches with expletives to assert their masculinity. The classical aspects also acted as a barrier for participation of sub-altern Tamil groups such as Dalits (Cody, 2018).

Although rhetorical flourishes and passionate calls are part of such cultures of public perception and mobilisation, however, it does not mean that there is no agency involved and mere 'incitement' is at play. Embodied participants of such public-ness are well aware that their very loud and boisterous presence is captured in media lenses and perform their markedly embodied presence accordingly. In most post-colonial societies, there is a similar historical trajectory in which scholars can be found to situate such modes of public-ness and public formation. Because the privilege of producing the relatively staid, rational, disembodied bourgeoise public sphere Habermas speaks of belongs only to a minority elite, it is through the amassing of assertive bodies that under-privileged citizens wrest for power. Such gatherings might also turn violent, clashing with law-and-order enforcement, and can have majoritarian, conservative, parochial tendencies as much as they can be for progressive, popular emancipation (Cody, 2015b). Such events and processes are often

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[168] See Cody, F., 2013. *The light of knowledge: Literacy activism and the politics of writing in South India*. Cornell University Press

considered detrimental to the democratic process when framed by those in the middle-classes or above in the social hierarchy. Rather than the ideal type of 'stranger sociability' which involves recognizing ties between strangers who discover similar sensibilities in each other, kinship and identity might be fore-grounded in these modes of publicity. Illiberal tendencies can also be a hallmark of such modes of public-ness. However, Cody cautions us against thinking of such 'non-Western' modes of public-ness and public politics as an inversion of the Western model or as a binary, and asks us to consider the more concrete forms of difference. Otherwise, analyses would run the risk of creating essentialized associations between forms of public, collective being that are more embodied as being prone to violence, susceptible to manipulation and utterly shorn of rationality. This also asks us to look beyond 'print capitalism' into other forms of the 'public'; indeed, any collective where people find themselves in conversation with others because this 'other', whether imagined or otherwise, is someone 'like us', one whom to a piece of discourse is targeted. Such modes of publicity too can be reflexive, with bodily, affective and cognitive responses that have been embedded in subjects through long term practice (Cody, 2015b).

8 The spectres of the crowd and the mob

In the family of descriptors dealing with human collectives, the black sheep undoubtedly are 'crowd', and to a greater extent, 'mob'. Both words conjure up visions of unruly masses engaging in violent acts, mindless or in thrall to some higher authority or idea. The scholarship on the subject since the 19th century has often been understood to have treated 'crowds' and 'publics' as a binary. However, a different reading of Freud[169], Le Bon[170], Cannetti[171] and others also tells us this split is not absolute. Rather they seem to exist in a continuum with one end, 'publics', given the pride of place based on the fact that it is composed of the self-reflective, autonomous subject of liberalism, not given to excess of emotion or utterances. In the Indian sub-continent, leaders of the independence movement such as Gandhi harboured tremendous concerns regarding the potential of crowds of Indians

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[169] Freud, S., 1955. Group psychology and the analysis of the ego. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (pp. 65-144)
[170] See Le Bon, G., 2002. *The crowd: A study of the popular mind*. Courier Corporation.
[171] Canetti, E., 1984. *Crowds and power*. Macmillan.

turning to violence[172]. This is quite paradoxical, given the idiom of piety and *satyagraha* that was to be the driving force behind India's impoverished masses. The leaders of the freedom movement had come to realize that without the support of India's largely illiterate peasant and labouring classes mounting a challenge to the British regime was not possible, and for this the language of re-discovery of tradition and religious overtones was deemed incredibly important. Not all populations have access to vital resources necessary for communication through official means (Spitulnik, 1997); this differential also determines what is considered orderly/savage articulation[173] (this differential may also exist between different group of elites depending on who captures power. This is an important injunction, given India's consociational political power structure). But this was to happen in a peaceful and orderly fashion, not through outbursts of violence. While there was a moralized, Romanticized image of the peasantry as toiling, salt-of-the-earth people at play, Gandhi was wary of the potential of the galvanized force of the masses (Chakrabarty, 2007).

For Le Bon, crowds were considered to be 'thinking in images', rendering them an immediacy that made the susceptible to a quick avalanche of associated images with linkages going hither and tither. Indeed, an important line of thinking with regard to democracy and mass politics has pondered upon the role of mediation, and if it acts as a hindrance to qualitative political action (Georges Sorel and Carl Schmitt). A medium calls for materials to produce and circulate, often in textual, hermeneutic form, and a 'vanguard' class to do so. Images do away with the need for this hermeneutic class, and lends a considerable degree of immediacy (Mazzarella, 2010).

Post-independence, Nehru was often reprimanding students and other agitators for using means such as hunger strikes and fasting for protesting against the state on various grounds and grievances. Such conduct, Nehru believed, was unbecoming of citizens of a sovereign country. The need to uphold 'order' was paramount, and the energy of crowds was to be channelled through the 'proper', institutional and bureaucratic means (Chakrabarty, 2007).

These concerns can also be seen in the earlier scholarship on crowds, chiefly the spectre of individual reason besieged and overcome by the 'collective effervescence' of a gathering.

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[172] The Chauri Chaura incident is the most prominent example
[173] See Rancière, J. (1999) *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press

Many authors associated such behaviours with femininity, the colonized people of colour across the world etc. Some psychologists and sociologists considered them a trait to be left behind in adolescence, unfit for adulthood. However, many other authors also pointed out that many fundamental human components such as language were impossible without collectives such as crowds. Transmission of emotions through processes such as 'mirroring', where one individual has an empathetic response to the emotions of those around him, is a part of this (Mazzarella, 2010). On a similar note, Freud noted that civilization would not be possible without the collective energy of many; however, such 'discontent' energies need to properly directed through repression. This dichotomy of order and chaos has been interrogated later; even in Freud's own work, this seemingly dichotomous relation is problematized through 'extimation', where the subject's interiority is dependent on external, inter-subjective factors. The sociologist Gabriel Tarde, whose essay 'Publics and Crowds' is one of the earliest works in this regard, also warned against the ways in which modern mass media systems could easily lead to the slippage of its publics to a crowd at the hands of unscrupulous editors and so forth. Again, we see its not so much a binary as a continuum (Tarde, 2010).

In another text Tarde goes on to talk about how important imitation/mimicry is to human civilization and society. This further problematizes the boundary between the thinking, rational public of individuals and the irrational crowd, for the contagious transmission of affect, ideas etc. had hitherto only been associated with the crowd, where the autonomy of the rational human being is eclipsed by the intensity of contagion. Innovations (difference) happen due to accidents occurring in the process of mimicry and repetition. This bears some striking similarities to Dawkin's original ideas of the meme (Mazzarella, 2010).

9 Violence through semiotic means

In the specific sites from which data has been gathered for this inquiry, namely the Facebook pages and groups, Twitter and Instagram handles, a significant but largely invisible labour goes into the production and maintenance of these spaces. A major share of this labour is done by the administrators of this page. For Bakardjieva, such labour is usually 'ethical' in nature, as it is fuelled more often by a sense of duty to nurture into shape these spaces, so that the discourse emanating from these spaces have an impact on the

society and polity, while also shaping the character of these discourses. However, it is not an entirely selfless endeavour, as there is ample scope to monetize the presence of such a large number of users in these comment sections (Bakardjieva, Felt and Dumitrica, 2018b). These are also spaces where users are actively not only airing their views and engaging, but also spaces where they are trying to mould the nature of the collectives that develop in these spaces. In this process there is always the risk of conflagrations occurring. While some might happen due to users being riled up in the heat of the moment, or due to the disinhibition effect of social media platforms, some also involve a certain degree of organization. There are no dearth of large groups of users singling out and hounding other users together, and this is one way in which publics are mobilised (Lawson, 2018b). Such groups may be part of political organizations, or may form 'ad hoc' based on ideological-affective affinity. Such vigilante actions online have sometimes been found to be reminiscent of violence carried out as a form of 'political spectacle' in public spaces offline (Ward, 2020). Such mass online action of one ideological group or regime-friendly non-state actor enjoys lack of governmental proscription (or enjoys tact support) may be part of a larger project of social or national isolation (Chavez, 2008).

Publics, or rather counter-publics, may also mobilise to confront such 'symbolic violence' online. This might especially be the case for individuals and groups of users from already marginalized backgrounds who might face attacks for being assertive about their identity (Lawson, 2018b). Such digital 'symbolic violence', a phenomenon explored by Gray, may include – attempts to treat users as less-than-human, denigration of signifiers representative of and or cherished by such communities, repeatedly resorting to negative stereotypes of such communities etc. Some of these actions might be taken for granted in everyday life, and be part of structural and institutional harm perpetrated against these communities (Gray, Buyukozturk and Hill, 2017).

10 Social imagination and the publics of circulation

It is often considered axiomatic that the sphere where a particular mediated text is communicated expansively exists prior to the circulatory network. The public sphere is just the 'meta-topical' space which facilitates communicative exchanges to occur. However, an increasing interrogation of the circuits of global symbolic, material, affective and cultural

circulation, especially after these were superlatively charged by the globalization of the last few decades, has given us a different perspective. There is an almost circular logic in operation; circulation of a text or discourse is done with a presupposition that a receptive audience or 'interpretive community' for this text exists at different nodes along the circulatory path (Lee and LiPuma, 2002).

Thus, the very process of circulation brings this community into being, showing us its performative dimension[174]. We are not merely thrust or thrown into a public sphere. Lee or LiPuma cites as an instance social rituals that involve the entire community coming together. Whereas in common sense terms such rituals may serve a referential function, pointing towards the community or society, it is a re-affirmation of the existence of society in other ways. In the very coming together of everyone a tangible glimpse of what is believed to be society is found. This is not a straight-forward process, and circulatory paths often intersect and collide with varied imaginaries and material conditions. Power inevitably shapes the trajectories of these circulations, as some die off and others take on entirely new paths (Aronczyk and Craig, 2012). It is only through tracing and tracking the mobility of circulating texts, media, commodities, currency etc. can one discover the many lives they lead. The argument that stems is startling – the tangibility of social formations and practices is contingent upon flows and circulation. They achieve permanence through repeated flows and circuits, and thus a concept such a public cannot be reduced to the objects that circulate through it. A public far exceeds the characteristics of the text(s) that may be flowing through it (Gaonkar and Povinelli, 2003). While these circulatory objects cannot be mobile without human beings and technology it is also true that they often take forms that are unanticipated. Benedict Anderson, Michael Warner, Charles Taylor and others have been the path-breaking scholars in this field.

The material implications of these circulatory paths become even more apparent when we consider, as Ahmed and others have done, the circuitous paths of affect and emotion. Affective existence is not self-sufficient; rather, they inhere in the objects in 'cultures of circulation'. One cannot, therefore, treat affect and discourse as two separate domains

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[174] The similarities with the retroactive formation of a 'people' in populism and the production of the 'represented' by representatives discussed in the second chapter are striking.

(Kanai, 2019b). Affect gains or loses intensity and potency as it hurtles through bodies both animate and inanimate. Affect operates under the aegis of a larger 'social imaginary', a concept termed thus by Charles Taylor. He defines it as:

> 'the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings……. The social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy'

Thrusting back the debate vis-à-vis mediation and immediacy, Taylor too makes a distinction between 'common people' and elites, saying the social imaginary is 'carried in images, stories, and legends'. Written texts are more readily accessible to elites, who may have access to interpretive resources. In many societies, the abstracted, transcendental point that enables one to see and theorise on an entire imaginary is simply not available. This imaginary provides the background that is taken for granted and that allows daily life of people to occur, because it is manifested in common actions that are recognized and accepted by a community of people. But it extends beyond that to larger questions of meaning-making and significance, cosmology, values and mores adhered to etc. As can be imagined given, these cultures borne of circulation have an important role in subjectification given affect's imbrication in these cultures of circulation.

Such a public, accrued through circulation of text, images, affect etc., may also have a certain 'intimate' character, in that certain texts, discourses etc. are produced with an eye with a particular audience that share similar lived experience. This similarity is based not only on history alone but also in terms of corporeal sensations and perceptions. Such texts and discourse may have a revelatory nature, laying bare innermost thoughts and emotions that may hitherto not have been available in public. Such narratives of trials and triumphs, pleasures and pain of living with an identity ascriptive or otherwise. (Berlant, 2008) .

The discussion above of memes and comments in section 5 of this chapter shows that the debate regarding issues such as the religious character of the Indian nation over time, and which religious community is responsible for communal violence and carnage from the Partition till today is channelled through the figure of political leaders. Mahatma Gandhi, whose 'acetic idiom' has left a stamp on the political 'style' of all three leaders under discussion, remains a target of scorn and calumny for the alleged victimization of Hindus.

The PM's figure, similarly, is a turf on which acrimonious debates regarding religious polarization in India play out, marked by offensive remarks and sarcasm. The corporeal figure of all three leaders we discussed, this study argues, bear the emotional, discursive and corporeal investment of the 'people'. With this chapter, we have gained an understanding of the hegemonic and privileged sections among the 'people' – the middle class, and the hold they have over the public and the popular, especially online. We have also seen how the electoral support base that has propelled the PM to power had expanded in 2014 and in 2019 from the BJP's traditional support base to include others, and how the figure and image of the PM was the chief attractive variable in this. We have seen the shifting economic positions of the PM and his regime, as a certain mode of welfare delivery linked directly to the PM was key to his electoral success in 2019. We gave a brief idea of the shape the scholarship on publics and or crowds has taken since the beginning of the last century, including its singular forms in the Global South in general and India in particular. Now, we shall proceed to understand how the modes of visual political communication used for connecting and mobilisation with users/voters/followers, online commentary, social media participation (and exclusion) and legitimization/delegitimization discussed so far are instrumental in determining the nature of the publics that forms around these images online. We will use the data and analysis provided in the previous chapters to unwrap these determinant connections.

11 A 'becoming' of the people

We have already discussed the scholarship in the first chapter which strongly fore-ground the poetic nature of the 'people' that forms around a populist leader. Unlike homogenous polities, national leaders in India have a far more heterogenous and stratified population from which to call upon a 'people'. This is not an easy task even for a leader crafting the 'people' along religious majoritarian lines, which is the case with the BJP and the PM as the extant scholarship strongly argues. Support had to be garnered from different Hindu caste groups which are at different positions in the caste hierarchy, engaged in different ways for recognition and redistribution through different political formations. The upper castes and dominant castes, usually secure voting blocs for the BJP, had their own grievances, given the democratic upsurge of marginalized castes which had led to erosion

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in the traditional dominance of the former (Gudavarthy, 2020). The 'aspirational' from different socio-economic strata, desiring upwards mobility, has remained another key demographic to be courted. This was to be done without raising fears of dangerous upheavals. The middle and upper classed had to be given a sense of secure consumption, and the stock market the sense of accelerated pro-market policies (Kaur, 2020). And an intimate connection had to be forged to each individual voter. All of this was channelled into the various performative gestures we have witnessed in Chapter II and Chapter III. The spectatorial position afforded to each individual user/voter/follower that seemed to be connected in various ways, and sometimes coincide with, the corporeal form of the leader, found some commonality and resonance in this form. The publics around these images was in many ways an agglomeration of these individual spectatorial positions. This aspect extended offline, as we have seen, with the figure of the PM closely connected with welfare policies that targeted individual consumption, such as cooking gas cylinders.

The PM had the dual engines of the acetic modes of Gandhi and the militant sage tradition to tap into the everyday unconscious of the spectators that have been immersed in these visuals. The Gandhian repertoire of gestures extended to include the spirit of volunteerism – *sewa* and *daan*, steeped in spiritual ethos, as well as pithy writings for the youth. Witty quips and an air of a gracious, warm elder who took an interest in their popular past-times endeared him further to the youth. The well-heeled and the youth could find a resonance in the selfie-loving leader who was at ease with fast-changing technological trends of visuality. The technocratic signalling includes an overtly displayed affinity for infrastructure projects and urban re-development and beautification. Both the youth and their parents could partake in the practices that strengthened the body through wellness practices such as yoga, which brought together responsible consumption, global recognition and upholding of traditional heritage. The visual spectrum of mannerisms and bodily comportments extended to the devout Hindu who paid obeisance not just to the traditional Hindu deities but also to the religious icons of marginalized castes. The nation's security was in the robust corporeal form who would celebrate and fraternize with soldiers defending the borders in the most inhospitable terrain and ride horses and tanks. Many of these gestures have a public aspect as well, such as religiosity and patriotism, that was squarely in line with the shape of the broader post-colonial Indian public sphere (some, of course,

had subtle transmissions of 'hotter' Hindu nationalism). The publics could imbibe the aspects that resonated the most with them, or even draw upon the other gestural moves on offer through these images. This was, to borrow a phrase from Raphael Sanchez, 'an entire program of becoming' (Sánchez, 2016, p. 29).

Kejriwal, similarly, had his gestural repertoire of a 'common man' with a '*grihasthya*' (household and family), with simple gatherings with kin and friends for meals and Hindu religious occasions. His personalized populist gestures had their own technocratic signalling, with his background as an 'IIT-ian' (who has get-togethers with his techie friends). The successful technocratic policy implementation for the 'common man' that his gestures included may have been smaller in scale to the PM, at the '*mohalla*' level. But the spectatorial location he offered had their own intimate and 'fiery' aspects, laden with propositions for the user/viewer. Kejriwal turns up at the door of middle-class households, hands folded and asking to come into their drawing rooms to discuss the various successful policies that provided public services (fig. 11 in Chapter III). On the other hand, he also tapped into the gestural repertoire of the militant Gandhian revolutionary, in this instance battling malfeasance and misappropriation by government officials and private entities. He had his own 'superhero' silhouette with the signature muffler tied around his head. The overtures of an activist have reduced considerably over the years as he is now the head of the government. Rahul Gandhi's stock of gestures was considerably limited compared to the other two leaders, but did include Hindu religiosity and caste markers inviting identification as a *janeu*-wearing Brahmin (fig. 34 in Chapter II).

The full range of gestures of these leaders was meant to conjure an entire 'people' through their gesticulatory corporeal form, their mannerisms, and their clothing. However, each gestural move was calculated as 'a nod and a wink' that connected with the private, inner lives[175] and desires of one population group or the other, or overlapped with multiple groups(Sánchez, 2016, p. 17). This was a necessity borne out of the 'social indeterminacy' that marks the Indian electorate at this point, which is also stratified heavily by socio-economic determinants and questions of representation (Spivak, 1988). There are no pan-

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[175] It might be as innocuous as sympathizing with school students dealing with the stress of exams or making quips on the PUBG mobile game, which is widely popular among teenagers and the youth

national alliances of marginalized castes that have mounted a significant challenge at the national electoral stage. The Yadavs and the Jatavs have faced isolation as the BJP has managed to make inroads into the OBC and SC communities in the region. There is also no significant working 'class-in-itself' nationwide that is a driver of electoral parties; the electoral returns of the Left parties have only been diminishing over time. As mentioned before, the assertion for recognition and redistribution by marginalized castes and communities and the gains they have made through affirmative action have led to anxieties and reciprocal demands by organized, dominant caste groups, many of whose members have failed to climb up the economic ladder (Gudavarthy, 2021). Meanwhile, there has been a pan-Hindu ferment ever since the Ram Janambhoomi movement started in the 1980s, that posits Hindus as alleged victims of 'minority appeasement', 'love jihad', demographic replacement and a litany of other grievances. The agrarian distress and unequal access to economic mobility, especially for socio-economically disadvantaged youth engaged in precarious employment, fuels further *ressentiment*.

This fractured polity provides fertile ground for the rise of leaders that can act as populist guarantors of the well-being and protectors of different communities. To a certain extent, we can draw lessons from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* and other works inspired by this landmark text. The populist leader here emerges as a direct 'protector', safeguarding the interests of communities, both marginalized and dominant ones, that feel they do not have adequate or potent political representatives for achieving these goals (Marx, Cowling and Martin, 2002, p. 101). This protection can also be afforded to individual citizens who may identify as the 'aam aadmi', an apolitical 'common man' that abstains from any engagement with electoral politics. There is a lot more than frustration with graft in the government and state-sector here; such citizens also consider political parties and the party system to be detrimental to their well-being, a part of the 'dirty' world of politics. A 'pure/clean', personalized leader that heads a party that is 'anti-party' and has no concrete socio-economic program other than adequate delivery of state services is quite attractive to such citizens. As such, both the PM and Kejriwal's oeuvre of political style conjures intimate, populist publics that are in various ways stridently 'anti-politics' and take a dim view of representative democracy. Such publics are part and parcel of the innocent, authentic 'people' plagued by various antagonists such as 'elites' (and in the case of populism

inflected by Hindutva nationalism, 'others' such as Muslims, dissidents etc.). The purported innocence of these publics stem from the fact they do not exercise political power; the elites are 'corrupt' not just because of rent-seeking, nepotism, mismanagement etc. but because they engage in the intrigue of party politics and the exercise of power (Urbinati, 2019). Thus, the leader appears to these populist publics as the sole figure capable of representing them against the political 'establishment', to lead them towards a '*vipaksh-mukt*' India. This 'anti-politics' populism is not entirely new to India, as Hansen has argued. He traces it back to Gandhi, whose communitarian performative oeuvre in the Hindu spiritual register downplayed local contestations for recognition and redistribution to elevate the national cause against the foreign colonizer. It gave the middle- and upper-class and upper-caste leadership of the nationalist movement an avenue to mobilise the masses as a united entity. The masses were an 'empty signifier' where the leadership could project their ideas of an innocent people of 'goodness' that could harmonize into 'village republics', without any questioning of hierarchies (Hansen, 1999, p. 45). Since the 1980s this distaste for 'politics' as 'dirty' has only deepened, as the backward castes became more assertive and the Mandal Commission was implemented (Fernandes, 2010; Roy, 2014).

Rahul Gandhi's visual oeuvre has no overt messages of anti-partyism or anti-establishment. His performative attempts to calls upon a 'people' are in the older Congress mould, through consensus and compromise and calls for secularism and unity. He does, however, have the figure of the PM, the BJP and the RSS as the opponents against whom he tries to mobilise people.

12 A mimetic public

This populist public gains knowledge of itself, and emotional sustenance, from the spectatorial position that almost seems to coincide with the corporeal form of leaders such as the PM. The individual users, whose aggregation forms this public, finds that visual oeuvre of the leader is also aimed at others who derive pleasure and are emotionally invested as this spectatorial subject, interacting with and transmitting these visual images on social media platforms in their own digital networks. They recognize themselves in the images of the leader addressing or fraternizing with followers, but also through the doubling of the gaze and the perspective of the leader which is offered through selfies. This generates

a feeling of 'we', a feeling of 'us' (Warner, 2002). This intense collective identification with the leader goes to the extent of the follower mimicking the leader's physical form, clothing, gestures and visage (in the form of masks and selfies).

Such mimesis becomes necessary in an anti-political structure where all other options have been repudiated and the excitable energies of the publics - generated by the anxieties, fears and contradictions of aspirations of upward mobility, desires to maintain the status quo, enhanced and continued consumption – are all channelled into the corporeal, gestural image of the populist leader (Sánchez, 2016). The spectatorial subject-individuals of these publics find their substance in mimesis which engenders further intimacy, proximity and coincidence with the leader. Such mimesis is also encouraged by the leaders (through measures such as #selfie campaigns) so that they remain the sole repositories of the 'people's' of emotional investment and identification. It must be the 'only game in town'; all other options must be recast as the enemy. Mimesis, thus, is both a source of governmental power and a threat. Alternative sources of identification and investment, which could perhaps lead to the creation of a different 'people' with a nature that is completely at odds with the present one, would pose a threat to the populist regime of such leaders. We must recall here the fears expressed by social theorists such as Tarde and LeBon discussed earlier in the chapter – crowds and mobs tend to be unpredictable and may be inimical to the established order. Rather than repressing these collective energies, they are channelled through the leader towards more 'productive' ends. These are 'totalizing and individualizing' modes of subjectivity in the field of representation (ibid., 145).

This threat of mimesis has been a pre-occupation of those who prefer definitive, orderly governance systems, such as Plato, who had put severe curbs on the activities of painters and poets for being possible sources of illicit mimesis. At stake is the subjectivity of the *demos*. These fears and misgivings stem from the fact that identities are the contingent products of history, and not the eternal 'essence' that nationalisms and leaders proclaim. As Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe argues, it is the offer of ontological certitude of identity and belonging that drives such politics of identification (Martis, 2005). As we have argued thus far, the 're-presentation' of representative democracy has an aspect of 'rendering

present'[176]. Given their totalizing aspects there are deep disturbing consequences that such politics may have, such as fascism (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1990). In the case of this study, we have seen how the PM's cache of visual gestures in his images provide a sense of Hindu civilizational ethos, a set of identity practices that can be 'branded' in the globalized world and provides continuity from the past. It also accommodates consumption practices prescribed under neo-liberalism.

The counter-public assertion against the PM, seen in the meme Fig. of Chapter IV, which uses the epithet '*dramebaaz*' might be missing out on a vital aspect of the operations of populist leadership and the publics location. There is an inalienable element of theatricality involved in the conjuring of the 'people', the 'making present that which is not present here', but whose potential of becoming is present in the crowds elsewhere, pulling hither and tither (Sánchez, 2016). The performance is successful in convincing citizens when it is 'felicitous', as per Alexander's schema, when it fits the narrative drawn from a background cultural cache. However, as we have discussed before, the figure of the leader can become of such humongous significance it may eclipse the background script, and decisions and actions may be justified *post-facto*. The citizen/user in the subject-position of the spectator can become a 'willing spectator', a concept formulated by Srinivas, where the subject has made significant enough investments in the narrative woven by the leader/protagonist. They find it plausible enough to continue believing in the leader/protagonist, irrespective of the turn of events (Srinivas, 2021, p. 176).

This, then, is also a 'politics of exemplarity', where iconic personalities or 'great men' fill the gap between the *demos* and the government, that exemplified the qualities that were considered the apotheosis of (overwhelmingly masculine) socio-cultural comportment. This

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[176] This need for certitude is also a structural condition of mass democracy, and leaves an opening where a 'people' seek a closure. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Pierre Rosanvallon had both anticipated this condition from different perspectives. Dr. Ambedkar's lines were prescient; he had spoken of the incommensurability of the political revolution following India's independence and becoming a Republic with constitutional democracy, and the lack of a social revolution that kept the caste-system intact. Rosanvallon detects a foundational 'double fictionality' in democracy. Political democratic systems abstract from the social an 'artificial body' of people. But the 'sociological principle' comes to loggerheads with the 'political principle'; democracy brings to light a citizenry of equal rights, whereas sociologically the citizenry are part of opaque hierarchies. See B.R. Ambedkar, 2008. Writings and speeches: A ready reference manual and Pierre Rosanvallon, P., 2006. *Democracy past and future*. Columbia University Press.

is found in European history in different forms, such as poetic literature, as well as political philosophy (for instance, Rousseau's 'Great Legislator'). This figure was necessitated to impose order on the 'crowds' after the 'Terrors' of the French Revolution (Lloyd and Thomas, 1998). In the case of our study, we see how this applies to the visual self-presentation of the PM presents a case, which works in consonance with the hagiographic treatment he receives in other forms of media, such as TV news, print publications, etc. Online users add to this hagiography, as we have seen in the memes legitimizing and valorizing his figure, personality and actions. Such 'great men' are not illustrated as separate from the 'common man'; rather, he possesses the ideal forms of behavioural attributes and virtues towards which the 'people' should aspire. In the intimate space of social media, the PM quips in a jocular manner – 'Retirement, what is that?' during an interview with an admiring Bollywood star (Fig. 36 in Chapter II). The PM has thus realized the full potential for the virtue of untiring hard work for the nation, a potential that lies in all citizens and whose full unleashing the PM inspires. As intimate spectator-subjects, all lines of sight, whether direct or self-reflexive, are towards the common focal point of the leader, and in sharing this vision of the best version of themselves they become a community assembled (Sánchez, 2016).

12a Volunteer publics

The populist leader as protector, discussed in section 11, is not just the leader himself, but is also a mimetic subject-position 'offered' to the individuals of the public. We see this in visual material for the 'Mai bhi Chowkidar' campaign motif of the PM for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. In the campaign song[177], the PM presents himself as '*aap ka yeh chowkidar…*' (this watchman of yours…..), the watchman keeping vigil over the nation's exchequer and wealth so that graft and rent-seeking behaviour cannot take place. The watchman's vigil also includes the boundaries of the nation against external enemies (strongman supporting strong defence forces) and maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in public places through sanitation drives and discouraging littering. The campaign song, sung in first-person representing (presumably) a citizen, states that '..he (the PM) has walked

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[177] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eaqslt6lrfE

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ahead alone/ I am merely a part of the queue following him'[178]. The video featured in Fig. 47 of Chapter II is along similar lines, with the text caption stating 'The word *chowkidar* has become a synonym for patriotism'. The video, again, is in the first person and serves as a call to arms for citizens to assume the role of watchmen themselves. The relationship between *chowkidar* and patriotism is not merely one of synonymity but also metonymy, one that extends to the live interaction between the PM and security guards from across the country (Fig. 46 in Chapter II), linking the general call also to plebian, economically weaker sections. It bore the signification of the PM of the world's largest democracy interacting directly with ordinary citizens, generating a sense of equality of stature, an accessible leader. There is an injection of agential significance to the subject-position of the mimetic citizen, who follows the PM in becoming a *chowkidar*, guided by the spirit of volunteer labour in patriotic service of the nation. This has its own distinctive character, different from the usual policy measures rolled out by regimes before elections to attract voters. Given the strong corporeal, affective links already established, where the intimate proximity almost leads to bodily coincidence, the mimetic urges to answer the head of the *body politic* are quite strong.

As we have seen in various images contained in Chapter II this is not the only time when users have enthusiastically volunteered for the PM. This had happened in various forms on Facebook and Twitter during his campaign for the 2014 elections, with citizens donating their labour to translate his messages in various Indian languages. Users also signed up for his 'Mission 272+' campaign, canvassing support for him both online and offline. The PM also activated the potential energy in the historical saintly idiom for his 'Swacch Bharat Abhiyan', often photographed taking up the broom himself and picking up litter. Here, again, the idiomatic resonances were strong with anecdotes of performances of sages and kings ceremonially engaging in activities considered menial as a show of humility and to confer dignity upon the same.

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[178] *'…woh ek akela chal para, mai uski hi kataar hoon'*

In Chapter IV, we have explored a sample of memes from the Twitter meme handle @realhistorypics. The content of the handle seems to have channelled well the zeitgeist vis-à-vis attitudes towards established historiography in Indian social media networks in contemporary times. Of course, @realhistorypics states that it is a satirical account and is dabbling in the genre of memes known as 'fake history', which we have also discussed in the fourth chapter. However, as we have seen in other images, some memes and visuals have an ardent and earnest stance in transmitting the message to viewers that established historiography is either inaccurate or biased, or worse, fabricated (to suit the needs of the established 'elite' – Mahatma Gandhi, the Nehru family, and the Congress party). In this thesis we find the contentions over history playing out in memes featuring the figures of famous political figures. They utilise the gestures and corporeal expressions of these leaders to make humorous, ironical or sombre political statements. The publics we studied are, therefore, also historicizing in nature, which is part of a larger effort to re-write the history not only of post-colonial India but also colonial, medieval, and ancient histories of the sub-continent.

13 The limits of interactivity and participation

The obverse underside of these populist publics was evident in the memetic material we studied in Chapter IV. We inferred the complete delegitimization as 'jackals', emasculated, demoness etc. of any opposition to the leader beloved to such publics such as the PM in that chapter. This is also a public whose anxieties regarding strength and masculinity had to be assuaged by consigning opposition leaders such as Kejriwal and Manmohan Singh to an abject form of inadequate manhood, based on their personality traits and bodily forms. The religious majoritarian under-currents of these publics were brought to the fore in memes that acclaimed a lionized, muscular, masculine Hindu leader, a true Hindu leader, of the country after centuries of British and Muslim rule. Opposition leaders such as Rahul Gandhi, in the meantime, for all his claims of being a 'Pandit', are of suspect lineage with a father whose name had a 'Muslim' ring to it (Feroze Gandhi) (Fig. 18 in Chapter IV). As we have discussed before, none of the leaders under discussion engage in extreme/hate speech. But the meme-makers unearth the polarizing potential in the Hindutva nationalist

rhetoric of the PM and manifest in the participatory structures of their memes. These participatory structures determine who is invited to derive humour out of these memes, creating bonhomie. It also determines who is being laughed at through the figure of the leader in these memes, and who is excluded (such as religious minorities, political opponents) (Phillips, 2015; Milner, 2016). These publics, thus, also have an exclusionary potential. And as discussed in the previous section, this is testament to the totalizing nature of the populism that marks these publics, which seeks to expel from the mimetic *body politic* all alternatives to the central focal figure of a leader such as the PM.

The counter-public memes we found in the study seek to dissimulate the tight integrity of the *body politic* by making space for the critique of the central figure of the leader. The meme pages such as Real History Pics, Unofficial: Subramanian Swamy do not usually seem to post memes that praise any particular opposition leader, except in delegitimizing the PM through comparison. They seem to host an online space which has a plurality of political positions drawn from across the political opposition. But this does not mean they do not criticize Opposition leaders as well. However, the participatory structure of these memes does not exclude users from partaking in the humour based on ascriptive identity. These pages, pro- and anti-regime, are a part of Udupa had called 'fun' as a political practice online, which bestows upon the user a sense of 'proto-political agency' (Udupa, 2014). As anthropological accounts show, these ludic practices are not just 'time-pass' but recognized as a productive political volunteer labour. There is pleasure involved in 'liking' and re-transmitting the visuals of a political leader one supports, or to make sarcastic memes on the leaders one opposes. A sense of ludic camaraderie is built through these practices of meme-making and sharing with like-minded users, a form of 'high-fiving' and common and laughter (Udupa, 2019).

This pleasure is also built into the very architecture of these platforms, that asks users to relentlessly interact, upload content, 'share', 'like' etc. (John, 2013) This is done in order to maximize one's visibility in the economies of attention online (Crogan and Kinsley, 2012). The individual users in the publics under study are not passive consumers of visuals; they require a sense of agency, of taking action in various forms. This is another field of guaranteeing a citizen-user's ontological certitude, in this case hinging upon visibility.

Consonant to the calls for volunteerism, the participation in selfie campaigns merges the quest for visibility with agential action.

One of the characteristic features of Web 2.0, of which social media platforms are a part, that were most trumpeted by enthusiasts was increased interactivity for users (O'Reilley, 2005; Sinton, 2018). Given this, and how populist politicians have been trying to establish intimate connections with their followers, it would be expected that the three leaders under discussion here would interact with followers here (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). That is, however, not the case. All three leaders' content has the nature of a broadcast to them. They do not respond to comments under their visual posts, either to the supportive ones or to the negative ones. The PM, however, is well-known for 'following' back on Twitter certain users/followers who are vocal in their support of the PM and his government. These 'follow-backs' give a sense of being 'seen' or acknowledged by the leader (Govil and Baishya, 2018).

14 Interrogating the populist-technocrat polarization

The interrogation to which we had subjected the technocrat-populist polarity in Section 7 of Chapter II requires elaboration in the Indian context after the above sections on the nature of the publics. To reiterate, leaders such as the PM are quite sensitive to the 'signalling' capacities of being prominent on social media platforms (Pal and Gonawela, 2016; Barberá and Zeitzoff, 2018). The same applies to being associated with infrastructure projects, from energy generation to beautification and re-development of urban areas (Fig. 54 – Fig. 56). This is, in fact, a part of their visual performative oeuvre, where a certain tech-savviness is considered as *prima facie* evidence of being a capable developmentalist, leading the nation towards prosperity, a prosperity no longer restricted to 'elites' but also to the plebian sections. Hence the carefully crafted selfie campaigns, the holographic projections and using the latest informational and communication technology to interact with followers. Even as a Chief Ministerial candidate he had his own TV channel and SMS and MMS campaigns, thus firmly establishing associational linkages with broadcast technologies (Jaffrelot, 2013). As mentioned in Chapter I, this was in play with earlier leaders too, such as Rajiv Gandhi, Chandrababu Naidu and their computers. This also extends to include business-managerial language of corporate and management school circles in electoral

campaigns. For instance, during his electoral campaigns the PM would use snappy acronyms such as '4Ts – Technology, Transport, Tourism, Travel' (Sinha, 2017). This image-work is in some ways an inversion of the Nehruvian image of mega-infrastructural projects; Nehru's legacy is maligned by the PM's regime, but the image of 'nation-building' through technology is assimilated. The techno-managerial aspect, then, is a significant part of the image of '*vikash purush*'.

This has been noticed to a certain extent in the ideological doctrine of the AAP. They choose to operate on an activated 'citizenship' (Postill, 2018), and all the ills of the social formation are blamed on corruption. Their unease with structural issues of poverty, inequality, caste hierarchy etc. is evident in the anthropological accounts of AAP workers and members when they had had to engage with slum dwellers. It has a pronounced middle-class characteristic, and there is some amount of pride in the professional-managerial class character of their cadre, exemplified by Kejriwal (Roy, 2014; Webb, 2020). AAP seeks to distinguish itself by being known as a party that believes in the delivery of services both public and private, such as healthcare and power. Their model of government is of a techno-managerial vision, where the government is merely a 'service provider'.

The scholarship that takes the populism as 'style' approach place populism and technocracy at antipodes, which as we see misses out on certain analytical avenues. Similarly, the scholarship on the populism of the PM also positions him against the 'liberal technocracy' of the previous UPA governments, which had a National Advisory Council and other notable experts driving its policy decisions. However, under the BJP regime, the NAC has been disbanded, and the five-year plans have been stopped (Gudavarthy, 2021). We have discussed earlier in this chapter how there has been considerable centralization of power in the Prime Minister's Office when it comes to policy decisions, with the decision-making capabilities bureaucrats, Cabinet Ministers, and state governments severely curbed. But there still are other bodies with technical experts and policy specialists working under the PM, such as the NITI Aayog, and personnel attached directly to the PMO. The earlier personnel have been replaced with those with an even more stridently pro-market (but also state corporatist) orientation, whose inputs must fit the leader's agenda. The technocratic flavour of governmentality is still at play, even if it is tight-fisted and centralized (even

though the 'liberal' characteristic may have been replaced by 'electoral autocracy' (Manor, 2021)). As with other political functions, the decision-making has been concentrated in the figure of the Prime Minister.

Government is thus recast as governance, a matter of management tools and techniques ('maximum governance, minimum government'). The obverse of this mode of governmentality is the consignment of 'politics' as an annoyance, a hindrance to 'development' and national security or worse, a seditious activity. The publics of the totalizing *body politic* under the populist leader, as we have argued, takes a decidedly anti-political bent by expelling every competing political entity into the category of an antagonist. Democratic modes of making claims to rights, recognition and redistribution are also cast in a similar light. Only then can development be achieved at the required pace and to the required degree, ensuring protection and welfare through the leader for each constituent individual and group of the social formation, the fractured polity. There is consensus here, but within the *body politic* itself as a unitary entity.

The performative corporeality of the leader, and the linkages of this corporeal form to the publics, thus, has its flipside in the desire for a smooth technocratic, managerial mode of governance. The two 'styles' are not at the opposite ends of a spectrum, but form of circular logic of governmentality. The populist unification of publics first ensures all obstacles to techno-managerial governance is expelled. One subsumes the other.

Conclusion

Through our investigation and analysis, we have found that the publics around the visual images of political leaders we have been researching have many singular characteristic. It is a public where middle-class ideas ideologies hold sway. It is a mimetic public, one that finds ontological certitude – 1) in the spectatorial subject-position with the figure of the leader at the focal point, 2) by identifying with the leader and imitation, 3) by channelling all hopes and fears in the leader's corporeal form. It is also a volunteerist public, that answers the call of the leader online and offline to contribute their labour. It is a historicizing public that contests, with a conspiratorial outlook, established historiography. It is a public that swings in a spectrum between ludic, humorous pleasures and bellicose, 'serious'

argumentations. But counterpublics are also at work around these visuals, as we have shown in this and the previous chapters. The actions and abilities of these publics and counterpublics are circumscribed by the nature of the political communication that the leaders engage in, and by the affordances of the technological platforms.

CONCLUSION

We began this thesis with a brief discussion of some striking phenomena that have been going on in electoral politics across the globe and in India over the past couple of decades. First was the consideration of 'personalization of politics', which stood out all the more distinctly in Westminster-style parliamentary systems. Some scholars considered it a 'Presidentialization', as the electoral contest started being centred around political figures in the way it does in the US. We have looked at how this personalization synced well with populist currents, with its overwhelming focus on the figure of a leader, someone who draws a lot of attraction and who leads a 'people' against 'elites' and other antagonists. We have explained why this is particularly of interest to politics in India, which scholars have said is a polity of 'competitive populism', with its most recent currents of populism beginning in the last decade with the PM and Kejriwal at the forefront (after an era of coalition governments).

On the other hand, the strategic usage of social media distinguishes populist politicians today. three Indians feature among the top 20 most followed politicians on Twitter worldwide – Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Arvind Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi. This work has investigated the role of online images of these three figures in political articulation and mobilisation. To be specific, this research has looked at the images, including selfies and memes, of these 3 politicians from social media platforms.

Given the multi-media nature of social media platforms, the teams of politicians use various visual means to attract and interact with the masses for mobilisation. This includes 'selfies' and photographs on their official profiles. At the same time, everyday users edit these images to create memes for humour and political commentary, signalling support or criticism. These draw elements from popular culture, mythology, folklore, news etc. In a polity characterised by a state of 'competitive populism' and 'constant mobilisation' such visual objects call for serious investigation. The visuals of leaders are seen to have a massive reach among the electorate – easily recognisable, transmitted through digital media, with growing internet penetration in a country like India. The work has tried to contribute to the studies of populism in India, in a growingly mediatized and digitised milieu of politics.

The extant scholarship has shown how populism harnesses the affordances of media and mediatization. A growing body of scholarship argues that the affinity of populism is similarly intense with digital media, especially the internet, through social media platforms. This is through the affordance of interactivity provided by the internet and is part of the increase of 'personalization of politics'. Research has found that as politics has become more dependent upon the personal traits of politicians, such actors seek to project certain attributes through their online presence. It is accompanied by the ascension to prominence of the bodily presence of the politician in terms of gestures, posture, facial expressions, dress, hairstyle and other ambiguous performances such as finger-wagging, clenched jaws and so on. In such a scenario, 'style' assumes great importance in the era of personality politics. Both these processes have been found to have a positive impact on political mobilisation as people feel more involved in the political process through these personalized interactions online. Personalized communication acts as a force multiplier on the interactive affordances provided by online spaces. Leaders such as PM Modi and CM Kejriwal already have a history of offline visual communication through their clothes, bodily and facial expressions, broadcast, mannerisms etc. Such 'personalization of politics' also extends to regional leaders.

Understanding these techniques is important because the relationship between the 'leader' and 'people' is paramount in populism. The social media platforms allow seemingly unmediated contact between populist leaders and their followers, leading to what Ralph Schroeder refers to as 'digital populism'. The circulation of leaders' images leads to new publics today, which play a decisive role in shaping our social imagination.

To reiterate the contents of this thesis briefly:

We laid out the objectives of this research in the introductory chapter of this thesis, as well as its rationale and significance in the first few pages. The chapter featured a review of the scholarly literature pertaining to this research, drawing from fields as varied as social media studies, visual studies, and political theory. This section also includes a brief discussion of the theoretical and conceptual literature to be used later in the thesis. The questions this thesis aims at answering are a part of this chapter, as well as the methodology employed to gather data and answer these questions. The methodology

section justifies the selection of politicians on whom data is gathered and the sites of data collection. We have also discussed in the prior chapter works that have dealt with the implications of visual material and visual idioms in Indian politics through the works of scholars such as Christopher Pinney, Kajri Jain and others.

We have named our first chapter 'Points of convergence: Media, 'style' and populism', and we began the chapter with a detailed discussion of the approach to studying populism that we have chosen – populism as 'style'. As we have argued in the chapter, this involves studying the politicians' body language, rhetorical style, political worldview, clothing etc., which meshes well with our methodological framework of critical visual analysis. We have picked up on performativity as a key conceptual component here. Theorisations such as those by Jeffrey Alexander are important in this regard. Alexander investigates the performative aspects of politicians, who are often the bearer of collective representations and act as protagonists in a Manichean script that manages to fuse the population into an enchanted 'people'. We have also gone into detail about Hannah Pitkin's *magnum opus* on political representation via Thomas Manin and Lisa Disch, and how here, too, performativity plays a part. The key insight we have drawn from this body of scholarship is the counter-intuitive idea that the 'representative' calls into being the 'people', "making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact". The 'mediatization' of politics is a phenomenon that is an original problematic, which (in part) gave rise to the questions in this thesis and related scholarship, and we have focused on this aspect in this chapter as well. From this, where we see a structural affinity for the media and populism, we move on to the intertwining of personalized politics and the social media presence of politicians. A short discussion on mediated populism in the Global South follows this. We then go on to trace the populist seeds that were buried in the media structure and politics of post-colonial India. Before going into the data in Chapter II, we end Chapter I by providing a vignette of the various aspects of the PM's and Kejriwal's visual style offline, on television and through other media such as holographic projection.

In the second chapter, titled 'Image politics I: Historical continuity on a digital platform', we laid out the first set of data we had collected – the official images of these three politicians on their verified social media handles. We divided the chapter into thematic

sections, themes that arose from our analysis of the various idioms of self-expression used by the PM, Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi. These idioms are – the saintly acetic idiom, the militant Hindu acetic idiom, the muscular strongman idiom with an affinity for the military, the neo-liberal consumptive idiom, the idiom of devout Hindu religiosity, the avuncular, elderly figure that imparts advice to parents and students etc. We analysed how Gandhian motifs are used in these official images, especially those of the PM and Kejriwal. We do this with the help of the works of Rudolph and Rudolph, Peter D'Souza and others. We also see the points of similarity and difference between the Gandhian and militant Hindu acetic idiom as manifested in these images. We have seen how this can inform a certain comportment in leaders, one that is muscular and masculine, with an affinity for the military. On the other hand, we have also explored how intimacy and closeness can be fostered by these images. We have a section that focuses on the differences between the PM, Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi vis-à-vis these visual performances. Through the analysis of these images and their 'signalling' aspects, we have problematised the organisation of technocracy and populism at opposite ends of a spectrum in the approach to studying populism as 'style'. We conclude with an explanation of the iconicity that is garnered by these images of the leaders.

In the third chapter, 'Image Politics II: The self(ie)-made populist', we put through analytical rigour a specific sub-set of images of self-representation by these leaders - selfies. We have begun by understanding the trajectory of how the three politicians have been self-representing themselves, offline and in other media. We then move on to the singular communication possibilities through the deployment of selfies. We have pin-pointed how the gestural politics of selfies allows politicians to draw their followers online ever closer by doing away with the mediating factor of a photographer, turning their own gaze on themselves, and showing the way their perspective appears to their followers. This drive for immediate contact between leaders and followers is an important analytical part of this thesis. In addition, we have also tried to show how it imparts a sense of empowerment to the followers, and how the feeling of 'live'-ness and 'being there' is generated by selfies. This has helped us detect some of the singular characteristics of populist mobilisation distinctive to South Asia.

The analysis of the second set of data – the memes of the politicians – comes next in the fourth chapter, 'Image politics III: Memes, history and identity'. We have laid out the methodology through which we arrived at the sample of memes that have been analysed first in this chapter. We see how users on social media use the very idioms that political leaders employ against them, for instance, their claims upon history. We extensively look at how each of the leaders under discussion – Rahul Gandhi, Arvind Kejriwal and the PM – are subjected to humour-laced delegitimisation by users. We also see how these same leaders are supported through memes of praise by their ardent followers, sometimes by attacking opponents. Our sample of memes includes vernacular memes and a set of memes from a Facebook page that archived WhatsApp memes. Both of these have their own distinct sections in the chapter. We understand the consignment to abjection as a means of delegitimization, as certain leaders are mocked for lacking a coherent identity or for lacking specific attributes befitting a leader of the nation. We also highlight the use of animalistic metaphors drawn from folklore in these memes as means of delegitimization. The theoretical corpus on legitimization and delegitimization in politics, especially by Theo van Kress, has proven very helpful in this regard. Limor Shifman's definition of memes also heavily informs this chapter, as does her explication of the participation structures in the content and humour of memes and how they may exclude certain groups. This leads us to a discussion on these memes' inclusionary and exclusionary potential through their repetition and circulation, and how they might reinforce identities and structural exclusion in the popular imagination. We have also considered the inter-textual flows that are so important for the production, consumption and transmission of memes.

We come to the pressing question of publics in the fifth chapter, 'Cyber-publics: Hegemony and contention', which we begin with a section on the middle-class nature of the 'networked individuals' who labour as curators and administrators of the sort of meme pages we have used as our sites of data collection. This is also ludic labour, that involves balancing the 'seriousness' of politics with the light-hearted nature of memes. We then move on to have an extensive discussion on the nature and trajectory of the Indian middle class and its contemporary manifestation, as it exercises considerable hegemony over popular culture, mass media and social media. We then have an extensive discussion on the electoral formation that pushed the PM to power twice. These considerations of

electoral politics are vital to understand the indeterminate social groupings, alliances, fractures, crises, socio-economic policies, and campaigning that put the PM at the helm. But through the scholarship on these very issues, we show how the figure and the image of the leader is a crucial analytical variable that has to be accounted for, something that quantitative surveys miss out on. We then move on to get a partial glimpse of the online publics by analysing the comments section of two of the memes we had included in Chapter IV. Following this, we have a brief theoretical discussion on the nature of publics and counter-publics, in print, online, on the streets, intimate ones etc., through the works of Nancy Fraser, Laurent Berlant, Michael Warner, Charles Taylor, among others. We develop an understanding that circulation is crucial to the kind of social imaginary and publics we are looking. Taking a cue from Francis Cody and Charles Hirschkind we see that political publics in the Global South, especially publics around the central figure of a political leader, require an expansion of the liberal idea of a rational and deliberative public. We also very briefly dwell on the scholarship on mobs and crowds.

Towards the latter half of the chapter, we show how the publics around these images of the leaders are not pre-existing but are the result of a process of 'becoming' through their visually mediated connection to the figure of the leader. We have also put forward our arguments that these are ocular publics comprised of individual users, interpellated as spectator-subjects. These are also mimetic publics, with a predisposition towards being 'anti-politics' and 'anti-party'. The populist nature of these publics is totalising in nature, with any opposition or dissidence to the central focal point of the leader being cast in an antagonistic light. The actions of these publics are circumscribed by the very nature of interactivity and intimacy with the visual content of the leader and the affordances of the technological platform.

It is the decision to understand these visual data sets through the analytical approach of 'populism as style' that allows us to access these insights and tease out the significance of all that is contained in the images. In many ways, the approach has proven to be sensitive towards the multi-modal aspects of a politician's style, which comes across in different mediated forms. In the case of this thesis, we triangulated upon images of political leaders to detect their stylistic, performative repertoire and the singular operation of populism this

makes possible. We also included a few stills from videos featured in the official social media handles of these leaders. We have looked at their clothing styles, signature attire, significations attached to their bodily form, witticisms, public persona, etc. The populism as style approach also helped us analyse how iconicity is sought to be incorporated into the images of these leaders. On the other hand, we saw how this very style could be used by counter-publics to criticise them through memes, and by supportive publics to defend and praise them.

This approach towards populism as 'style' also made it a good fit with the methodological framework we adopted to closely study the data, the visual discourse analysis method of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. This methodology allowed us to draw out the various components of the images and how they impinged and interacted with the viewers. It was well-suited to find the answers to our questions as this methodology stresses three affordances/characteristics of images – their composition, their interaction with the viewer and their representational schema. The interactional elements in the images, such as the vectors of the leader's gaze, provided us great insights, especially concerning selfies where the photographic subject (the leader) is also the one behind the camera, determining what is on 'offer' to the viewer. It also lets us consider all the 'social propositions' on offer in the images, to foster intimacy, identification and intense emotional investment that is a part of 'populist style'. The compositional and representational analysis allowed us to foreground certain idioms of historical lineage that we have discussed already.

Another key methodological tool for us was the conceptualisation by Shifman regarding the structure of memes. It helped us determine memes' participation structure - who is being addressed, who is in on the joke/humour and the tone of the meme's humour. Although memetic content varies across geographies in terms of content and form, the formal characteristics of memes have striking similarities. We have seen in Chapter IV how certain exclusions can be built into memes. Sometimes they are for political contention, aimed at one's political opponents, meant to delegitimate them. It is part of the vigorous online to-and-fro, the 'nation talk' between middle-class Indians who consider themselves 'liberals' or 'nationalists' (Udupa, 2019). However, as we have seen in certain cases, it can reproduce the structural exclusion of minorities in online spaces.

Findings

The visual field we have studied here with the political leader as its focal point tells us the modes adopted by the leaders for self-presentation, with connectivity, intimacy, 'signalling' and iconicity in mind. These images tell us how they have plugged into the visual archive of India's political and cultural history towards these ends while also revealing the contemporary and popular modes they have adopted. Sometimes the former is strained through the latter, and vice-versa. Even in the case of the historical archive, we see that the source material is the stalwart personalities and modes of expression and communication associated with them. Mahatma Gandhi figures pre-eminently here, with his genre of writing, artefacts and biographical locations associated with him forming a productive pool of resources to draw from for the images of these politicians (Fig. 1-7 in Chapter II). On a closer look, however, one notices certain forms of frugality practised by Gandhi, deeply self-revelatory writings chronicling doubts etc., are missing. These stylistic forms of communication can stretch to hint at characters of myths and fables, such as ascetic *yogis*.

The other side of the stylistic oeuvre of these leaders is the more contemporary assertion towards neo-liberal, aspirational consumption. This is more pronounced in the case of the PM than Kejriwal or Rahul Gandhi. From the austere kurta to the opulent attires and accoutrements from high-end fashion brands, the PM embodies a certain permissive-ness for consumption oriented towards access to a free flow of commodities in a market (Fig. 12,13 in Chapter II). Rahul Gandhi also switches from his plain kurtas to more trendy t-shirts, jeans and jackets from time to time, possibly not to be associated with a typical politician at all times (Fig. 16 in Chapter III). This consumption is tempered with a 'heritage' of Hindu civilisational ethos and religiosity.

The more contemporaneous visual style also builds associational linkages of the PM and Kejriwal to infrastructural projects, urban beautification, and public service delivery. The PM is especially keen on associational linkages with mega infrastructural projects, such as transportation hubs and circuits, energy generation etc. This is a form of 'signalling', a political communication tactic that works in tandem with the very visual presence of these leaders on social media platforms (Pal and Gonawela, 2016) (Barberá and Zeitzoff, 2018).

The PM has far out-performed the other two leaders here, with a prominent textual and visual presence and transmission that was earlier and far more voluminous than the other two. This 'signalling' is mainly through displays of affinity with the latest 'hi-tech' forms, such as social media platforms, and infrastructural projects. It is a form of political communication seen throughout the Global South, used by leaders to convey the image of someone who would take the nation technologically ahead. It also helps in winning over the elites with economic, social and cultural capital, as well as the youth, who are usually the first demographics to adopt social media platforms (Fig. 54-57). As such, displays of affinity for contemporaneous and popular technological forms are not strictly for 'voter conversion'. Political leaders in the Global South, thus, invest in social media presence irrespective of the percentage of their electorate that uses social media. Research has found that leaders in societies with mass democracy are more prone to establishing a social media presence (ibid.). There is no evidence to show that leaders in wealthier Global North countries are more enthusiastic about establishing social media presence. For populist leaders, these platforms are also an easy way to bypass traditional mass media, where they may face unmanageable criticism. These platforms allow leaders to directly transmit to users and present an image over which they have complete control and allows them to present a version of themselves that is 'likeable'.

All three leaders prominently display themselves as partaking in Hindu religious practices and rituals (Fig 27-35 in Chapter IV). The PM and Rahul Gandhi present themselves performing rituals in prominent temples such as the Somnath temple. Rahul Gandhi also prominently displays his *janeu*, the distinctive thread worn by Brahmins, to stake a claim as a Pandit. However, we find his claims being mocked by visual memes that portray him as someone who, at best, is confused about his identity (whether he is a Hindu or an 'Islamist') and at worst, is camouflaging his Muslim heritage (due to his father's Parsi name being Feroze) (Fig. 17, 18 in Chapter IV). Kejriwal portrays himself as a Hindu householder, engaging in puja with his family. All three leaders also pay tribute to icons of Hindu marginalised caste groups regularly (Fig. 30, 32).

Religiosity is also one of the prominent sources of visual cues depicting bodily robustness, muscularity, masculinity, martial prowess etc. Such images are numerous in the case of

the PM. Towards this end, he has another 'saintly idiom' to channel, one very different from the Gandhian one, informed by the Vaishnavite and Jain spiritual teachings of Gandhi's birthplace (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2009). This is the more militant acetic mode, exemplified by Swami Vivekananda, which laid stress on bodily discipline, a well-developed physique and spiritual-epistemological awakening meant to resurrect Hinduism's 'lost glory' in the face of colonial rule (and before that Mughal rule). The militant upper-caste insurgents also channelled it against the British in the late 19th-early 20th century (Sanyal, 2014). This militant masculine ethos works well in consonance with the image of a PM whose robust constitution has remained an integral part of his image. This also works well with his visuals of riding horses in remote border areas, fraternising and celebrating important festivals such as Diwali with soldiers posted in not-very-hospitable areas, defending the territoriality of the nation (Fig. 19 in Chapter II). The affinity and affection for the armed forces extend to images of riding mechanised artillery vehicles, creating the impression of a leader deeply invested in national security (Fig. 22 in Chapter II). Such martial masculinity was also tapped into by Rahul Gandhi, with an image of Parshuram, the foremost symbol of Brahmin martial symbolism (Fig. 35 in Chapter IV). Both his and the PM's visual presence in this respect harkens back to the historical construction of roaming bands of Hindu ascetic sages who battled invaders and protected important pilgrim routes (van der Meer, 1996) .

The memes, in many cases, bring out the disavowed, unspoken underbelly of the performative oeuvres of these leaders. In the case of masculinity, we see a valorisation of the PM and his image, and indeed his very physique, as lion-esque. The simultaneous move is to cast those opposed to the PM as effeminate, as jackals, and other such animals that are quite low on the totem pole of virtue-laden anthropomorphised animal figures in myths and fables (Kaur, 2020). Thus, Kejriwal is depicted as an obsessed, jealous lover (for his criticisms and his demands for records of the PM's educational credentials) (Fig. 9, 10 in Chapter IV). In addition, the entire political Opposition is equated to jackals, considered a baser creature that is devious and cunning (Fig. 25 in Chapter IV). The PM is the lion, the epitome of nobility and courage, standing alone against an array of 'villainous' figures. The populist politician, thus, becomes the 'heroic' figure of popular cinema, fighting off villains through wit and physical prowess. Rahul Gandhi has already

been typecast as a buffoon-like character on social media platforms (compared to the astute PM) (Fig. 6-8).

Similar is the case with public religiosity. The PM is canonised as the first 'Hindu Ruler' after centuries of Muslim and British rule (Fig. 34 in Chapter IV). Gandhi is castigated for allegedly refusing to accommodate the 'cultural rights' of Hindus (presumably for not pushing for India to be a 'Hindu country') while being supportive of the creation of a nation-state for Muslims (Pakistan) (Fig. 19 in Chapter IV). The castigation extends to previous Congress governments for 'minority appeasement'. Thus, the Hindu supremacy that is still disavowed in official discourses but is brazen in public speeches by elected representatives (without consequences) also rears its head in some of the memes we have studied here.

We have shown through the images and arguments in Chapter III how selfies are significant for political leaders to establish intimacy. Here, too, the PM enjoys a first-mover advantage over the two leaders. His selfie-based campaigns evoke tremendous enthusiasm (Fig. 3,4 in Chapter III). His selfies with leaders of other countries serve as a diplomatic soft power tool and allow his followers to feel closer to the internet circles of power and sovereignty (Fig. 5-7 in Chapter III). It is the gestural politics involved in selfies that generates intimacy and closeness. First, the mediation of a photographer, and their impositions on the photographic subject, is removed. The subject wields agency and is directly communicating with the viewers. This is a prized effect for populists, the doing away of any mediating artifice and generating the aura of 'authenticity'. Secondly, beyond offering even closer proximity to viewers/followers to their own selves, leaders can offer them a glimpse of their perspective, an aspect of selfies' 'see me showing you' characteristic. This puts the viewer/follower at the same spectating location from which the leader's gaze emanates, intensifying the self-referential and deictic function of images. This further integrates the viewer/follower into the 'people', the *body politic* forming behind the leader. Another characteristic of selfies is that they offer a set of propositions to the viewer. In the case of leaders, this is the same as the images that Kress and van Leeuwen call 'offer' images, where the leader is sharing their vision with their followers. In the case of selfies, at first glance, they seem to be 'demand' images, as the leader's gaze

is directed straight at the viewer. However, in the case of the selfies we analysed, the leader is 'offering' their perspective to the follower. Rahul Gandhi is offering his intimate proximity with the CEO of Twitter (Fig. 11 in Chapter III). The PM is offering to the viewer to share in the intimate closeness he enjoys with world leaders in his selfies.

Of course, it is not through selfies alone that intimacy is generated. We recall images such as Kejriwal praying with his family at home, Rahul Gandhi playing with his dog, and images that seem to be candid and capture moments of the leaders' private lives (Fig. 12 in Chapter III). Such images are a form of communication meant to bring the follower closer to the leader. Images of religiosity and other such practices that seem to be of an everyday nature invite strong identification from viewers. However, the structure of these images is such that participation and identification are possible only for those with whose inner life-worlds these images resonate. The PM presents as an affable elder to families and adolescent students, advising on their studying and recreational habits. Various components of these images and the words also induce pleasure in the user/viewer as the PM shows familiarity with particular linguistic mores or practices related to them (such as his quip on the PUBG game while talking to parents and students) (Fig. 37 in Chapter II). These serve as a 'nod and a wink' to a particular group, as it induces a feeling of being seen and addressed by the leader himself, an address specific to a group.

Discussion and answers

We have used our findings and analysis to find answers to the pressing questions raised in the introductory chapter. The foremost question we raised was regarding partisan mobilisation around these images of the leaders. Another important question we raised was regarding the nature of the publics that coalesced around these images. We find that the analytical answers we had to these questions overlap in some aspects. They are as follows.

These visuals of these leaders mobilise the average user by offering them the position of an ocular subject, a spectatorship that is very intimate, and in some cases, almost coincides with the corporeal form of the leader. There are a number of propositions in the images that invite the spectator to strongly identify with the leader, as we have discussed in the

findings above. To those who support the leader, this drive for intimacy goes to the extent where the ocular, haptic, or holographic connection is no longer enough. There has to be a 'presencing' of the leader through the very bodies of the followers. Hence, the masks and attires of the followers mimic the leader's bodily form, even in children. This stakes a claim to a certain identity as a supporter in public, a scaffolding of one's identity. The leader, in the representative democracy of India, is not just representative in the sense that he speaks for the electorate or constituents. Through the visual, performative images we have analysed, we also see that the leader engages in 'representation' in the aesthetic sense, embodying an ideal for identification in cultural, political and other respects (representation in the sense of '*darstellen*'). We find merit here in Lacoue-Labarthe's argument that the German '*stelle*' in '*Darstellung*' is a form of making upright, providing support. The follower draws ontological substance and certitude from the image of the leader (Martis, 2005).

A lot of the effort goes into building images of these leaders as 'iconic', lending them iconographic depth. Iconographic images always have considerable depth beneath the surface, an excess of connotative pipelines beyond the merely descriptive and the denotative meanings (Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen, 2012). This can be observed, for instance, in the images we analysed where the current PM and Kejriwal seek to draw upon the iconic force of earlier Gandhian images, through re-creation, metonymy and synecdoche. These pipelines have an affective potential on viewers, who can draw their own share of meanings from the hermeneutic pipelines on offer. Here there is a tension at play; the dominant and hegemonic ideology seeks to limit the proliferation of meanings, as intended by the makers of the image. But the connotative excess may spill over. Thus, channelling a figure such as Gandhi is not without its risks, as patriotism and reverence at the re-staging of the Gandhian oeuvre may not be the only meanings being inferred. Hence the memes that poke fun at the images of the PM spinning the *charkha* for the Khadi calendar. This is how the to-and-fro of visually mediated conversations occur on Indian social media spaces.

Such image users are not addressed as a mass, but as discreet individual users. The intimacy and mobilisation generated are also meant for each user with an individual

screen. This, however, does not mean that only Bennet and Segerberg's 'connective action' is at play; collective affects are also generated, and thus publics come into the picture. Users see the images of leaders addressing collectives of people, and this is one of the many avenues where they feel like the part of a public being addressed. This is also an emotion induced by selfie campaigns and images of selfies with a collective by these leaders. Through networks and transmission, on Facebook and Instagram pages, Twitter threads, comments sections and Whatsapp groups, users come to know of others such as themselves. Michael Warner posits that it is through the circulation of texts and images that viewers and consumers construct their social imaginary, and attain a feeling that a text/image is addressed to them and 'others like me' (Warner, 2002). This vector of addressing is especially powerful with images of the leaders we have analysed, following Kress and van Leeuwen's theorisations of 'demand' and 'offer' images. As discussed in the paragraph above, these images have various historically informed hermeneutic pipelines on 'offer'.

In the case of memes, this feeling of a collective also stems from the recognition of genres and popular cultural references. Creating, transmitting, and consuming these memetic materials is a pleasurable, fun activity. Users can provide symbolic recognition on social media platforms to each other through these memes. A meme's participation structures and tonal qualities further this feeling of a 'group', as they can have an 'us' versus 'them'. This 'them' is usually the out-group at whose expense humour is evoked. This can be ardent followers of a leader being inflamed or angered; however, it could also be marginalised communities. We found a clear distinction between publics who engage in the latter, and counter-publics who engage in the former. Through circulation, through repetition of these memes and their participation structures, identity-based structural exclusion can be exacerbated.

Of these publics, the political leaders call into being a 'people' through their stylistic performances. The people do not pre-exist this call; the political leader is engaged in 'making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact'. The 'representation' here is a way of 'rendering present' (Sánchez, 2016). The performative and theatrical aspects of visual 'style' through the very bodies of the leaders

are essential for this act of conjuring that which is not present here but elsewhere. This is key to the manner of identification and emotional investment we have discussed so far. The collective 'people' also gain knowledge of itself through these leaders' performative oeuvre. The investment is so profound because the ocular spectator subject draws certainty from the corporeal performative form of the leader, so much so that identification can be mimetic in nature, with followers donning the masks, attire and imitating the mannerisms of the leader.

This need for mimesis arises from a turbulent socio-political formation where there is a great aspiration for upward mobility from marginalised sections. In contrast, erstwhile dominant caste and class groups seek security and continued prosperity. Since there is no representative party that has been able to form an alliance of different marginalised groups or dominant groups to achieve their goals, different communities feel the need for a 'protector' figure, similar to the situation with Napoleon, the French peasantry and the French bourgeoisie described in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* (Marx, Cowling and Martin, 2002). Identification with such a 'protector' figure tends to be totalising, and all opposition is repudiated. The leader's corporeal, gestural figure becomes the sole repository for the desires and fears of the different communities. All the anxious energies of a population that has had a 'political revolution' that creates equal citizens but not a 'social revolution' where traditional hierarchies are removed, are channelled through the figure of the leader towards productive ends[179]. The leader, too, desires to be the 'only game in town' for such investment. Any other project of 'people'-making, whether grassroots or leader-driven, is a threat. These fears and misgivings also stem from the fact that identities are the contingent products of history, and not the eternal 'essence' that nationalisms and leaders proclaim. This leads to a particular 'anti-politics', where all political opposition or those who cannot identify with the leader come to be seen as 'enemies'. It is also inimical to democratic multiparty systems, as these parties are seen to be synonymous with the malaise of rent-seeking and graft, misuse of the public exchequer, loss of 'moral values',

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[179] See footnote no. 176 in Page 273 for a discussion on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Pierre Rosanvallon in this regard

loss of identity due to 'minority appeasement' etc., from which only the leader can provide a way out ('anti-party', except for the party of the leader).

The leader becomes a figure of exemplary characteristics, one who is able to prime to the fullest the potential for greatness in each individual that constitutes the people. This exemplarity is a product of the labour that goes into image-making, for instance, of a leader who works with very little sleep, does not think of retirement, and maintains a physique (through civilisational practices such as yoga) (Fig. 23, 24, 36 in Chapter II) that signifies his muscular way of keeping the country safe from enemies both internal and external.

Such exemplary leaders can also inspire volunteer labour from followers, as we have seen in the Fig. related to the PM and Kejriwal. Some of this was online labour for the PM, translating his speeches, campaigning online for him etc. Some of it involved the making of memes acclaiming and praising him in transmitting them in digital networks. It also involved the sacrifices made by ordinary citizens in the form of monetary donations made to the AAP's electoral campaign. The 'Swacch Bharat' campaign had the PM performing in the 'saintly idiom' once again, engaging in the tasks of picking up litter and cleaning the roads with a broom, in an attempt to enthuse citizens to participate. The '*main bhi chowkidar*' campaign of the PM for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections is another interesting example of volunteering publics. He sought to instil a sense of delegating the task of being a 'protector', a watchman who guards the nation against littering, graft by government officials, terrorism etc. in their capacity. This is a move that provided an agential function to followers and citizens, while increasing identification with the leader.

Through the analysis of the data and findings, we have argued through this thesis, in various sections of Chapters II, III, IV and especially chapter V, that these publics, volunteerist, specular and antagonistic towards all other political orientations seem to be reforming the Leviathan, a *body politic* with the leader as its proverbial 'head'. The acephalous polity, which could no longer be mapped in the figure of a human body due to democratic revolutions in the past three centuries and its inherent plurality, has slowly started to resemble a Leviathan *body politic* again, deeply suspicious of that which has not been included in its symbolic/corporeal form.

We have already discussed the limits to participation through the inherent structures of inclusion and exclusion in memes. It is vital to note that a particular image of a leader or a particular performance may resonate with the intimate life-worlds of only certain population group. It must also be reiterated that the communicative practices of the three leaders are not interactive in the way that was envisaged with Web 2.0. They do not interact with any responses, whether positive or negative, left below their posts. The PM, however, has a history of 'following' back some of the Twitter accounts of his most ardent supporters. The matter has garnered some controversy, as several of these accounts have been found posting communal extreme speech and misogynistic content (including rape threats). The matter has even been raised in the Parliament in the past[180].

The interactive capacities of the publics around these images are, thus, circumscribed by their ocular subject position of spectatorship. They can acclaim their leader by transmitting the leader's content in their digital networks, making memes supporting their leader, and launching vitriolic attacks on opponents. There is some similarity here, as Srinivas has pointed out, to the fans of actors-turned-politicians of Southern India (Srinivas, 2018, 2021). They, too, had their primary contact with their idols and leaders mediated by screens and other visual materials such as posters. They were vociferous in praise and celebration of their 'hero', and quick to attack critics of the politicians, sometimes involving physical violence. However, there are some differences between the cinematic publics, too, from the publics that we have studied so far. Cinema was always viewed as an entertainment medium, not something involved in electoral politics. When cinema first came to the country, the nationalist elites viewed it as a possible public nuisance that could potentially mislead the plebian sections with its 'Western' licentious behaviour. There was also a clear class and caste distinction in the consumption patterns of cinema and popular audience reactions in and outside cinema halls around this media form (Prasad, 2009).

On the other hand, social media platforms were a part of Web 2.0, and have had a discursive attachment to terms such as 'horizontality', 'peer-to-peer', 'participatory' etc.

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[180] https://www.indiatoday.in/fyi/story/bhak-sala-rahul-raj-derek-obrien-twitter-troll-tmc-958831-2017-02-03

and were considered a net 'good' for democracy[181]. More and more 'voices', hitherto ignored, were to be heard in this new agora as it increased accountability of governments and powerful actors and established a flat topological network of equality. We must here draw from Science and Technology Studies to remind ourselves that technological forms are never just treated as technology; meanings are attached to them, too (Woolgar, 1991). The discourse around these platforms gathered such a meaning that ideas of publicly accessible space on them led to a form of collective 'us', through which democracy would be strengthened. Governments across the world had e-governance initiatives, including India, to better serve democracy[182].

We know now that such techno-utopian hopes have not come to fruition, as social media platforms have become hubs of misinformation and hateful incitement, while the corporations that own them increase their profits through total surveillance for data extraction[183]. These platforms have now become thriving hotbeds of populist mobilisation throughout the globe, which in many cases have been exclusionary towards ethnic, sexual and other minorities and 'others'. The 'myth of us'[184] has transformed into the populist 'us versus them', as we have also noted in this study. The trolls and other entities, both individual and collective, have become empowered. In the case of Indian social media spaces, it is not always legible exactly which sections are part of such exclusionary mobilisation of 'people' in terms of class and caste, given the structure of these platforms.

Another major argument that we have advanced in this thesis and its findings is that the polarity between the technocratic and the populist needs to be interrogated in the case of India (and perhaps other parts of the Global South) when it comes to studying populism through stylistic considerations. Two of the leaders under consideration, the PM and Kejriwal, have always engaged in technocratic and techno-managerial 'signalling', as we

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[181] Voices such as Clay Shirkey, Tim O'Reilly were prominent in this school of thought. See Avril, E., 2014. Social networks and democracy: Fightbacks and backlashes in the world wide agora. In *Democracy, Participation and Contestation* (pp. 243-255). Routledge.

[182] See, for instance, Alathur, S., Ilavarasan, P.V. and Gupta, M.P., 2011, September. Citizen empowerment and participation in e-democracy: Indian context. In *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance* (pp. 11-19).

[183] See Zuboff, S., Möllers, N., Wood, D.M. and Lyon, D., 2019. Surveillance Capitalism: An Interview with Shoshana Zuboff. *Surveillance & Society*, *17*(1/2), pp.257-266

[184] See Couldry, N., 2015. The myth of 'us': digital networks, political change and the production of collectivity. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(6), pp.608-626.

have discussed in section 8 of Chapter II and section 14 of Chapter V. This is done to impress upon the electorate, especially the upper echelons and the youth, that the leader is savvy towards technological upgradation, which in turn is linked to economic growth and development, a goal that is shared by much of the electorate. Visual association through images with large infrastructural projects has always been a mainstay for the PM, since before he entered 10, Race Course Road. Also, presence on social media platforms is a similar signal towards being tech-savvy, sharing an eagerness and enthusiasm symbolic of vitality. In addition, given the discussion above, social media presence signifies engaging in the promise of 'digital democracy' and an eagerness for 'interactivity' with the electorate. It can even signal an affinity for tech-libertarian ideas of free speech, as seen here:

Fig. 1

Some scholars make a distinction between the 'liberal technocracy' of the earlier UPA I and II governments and the NDA government since 2014. The National Advisory Council (NAC) and the Planning Commission have been scrapped; indeed, these are seismic events. However, this has only led to a centralisation of technocratic power in the office of the PM. And while the previous body of experts has been removed, there are new experts in bodies such as the NITI Aayog and the PMO itself, not to mention private consultants, whose thinking align with the PM.

We have argued that technocracy and populism can form natural amalgamations, given certain structural characteristics and the Indian context. In technocratic terms, too much

'politics' is always a hindrance to the smooth implementation of developmental policies. Politics becomes associated with terms such as 'dirty', 'corrupt' etc., a field of local 'big men', violence, 'vote banks' and caste and kinship-based voting, a far cry from the promises of neo-liberal consumption and technological development. The populist Leviathan *body politic*, which is anti-politics and anti-party, mixes well with this distaste for politics in technocracy. Populism and technocracy, thus, exist in a virtuous cycle, with each one bolstering the other.

In the introductory chapter and Chapter I, we discussed the Laclauian argument that all politics is at various points on the highway to populism. We have also discussed how populism, or the lack thereof, is a spectrum and not a binary. In gradation terms, Rahul Gandhi seems to differ from Kejriwal and the PM as his visual performative oeuvre seems to be lacking in several of the distinguishing trends seen in the latter. His 'people'-making project does not seem to involve any 'others' or 'elites', so to speak. Nor does he seem to perform as a 'protector' of any kind. He only positions himself against the PM and the larger Sangh Parivar, and has visual content that directly attacks the PM. Rahul Gandhi was a late-comer to political communication through social media. The personalized politics surrounding him as the chief figure of electoral Opposition stems from larger structural currents in Indian electoral politics and mediatization after 2009. Rahul Gandhi has become a 'presidential' candidate for the Congress party in this field of personalized politics dominated by giants such as the PM. This 'Presidentialization' of Westminster-model parliamentary democracies has happened globally over the past decades (not least in the UK itself) for a myriad of reasons, with the media being a significant variable (Mughan, 2000; Helms, 2005). Of course, there have been personalized political giants in post-colonial India, with Nehru and after him Indira Gandhi. The central argument of 'Presidentialization', that the leader of a parliamentary party has an impact on the voters to either vote or not vote for the party, remains to be researched in the case of Rahul Gandhi.

Limitations of the present study and scope for further research

This thesis revolved around three male leaders, and the findings of the investigation, too, involved significant insights into the role of masculinity in their visual performative

oeuvre on social media platforms. The study would have been richer if the sample of political leaders could have been expanded to include female leaders would have been included. Unfortunately, our ethnographic foray revealed did not reveal the same level of online conversations happening around the Indian female politician with the most online following, Smriti Irani. This does not, however, mean that female politicians are not a significant part of online conversations or that their visual presence does not hold great significance. There is already a considerable body of scholarship on female political performance and 'style' (in the sense we have used the concept in this thesis). There are certain subject positions available to female politicians in the Indian socio-political context, such as that of the 'motherly' figure (one immediately thinks of Jayalalitha here, with her sobriquet 'Amma') or some kinship based female figure. However, some female performances involve singular manifestations of the ascetic idiom. A study in the same vein that uses this approach would provide new insights into online politics.

This thesis also shows us a thread that can be pulled on to illuminate the pressing issue of retroactive historiography that has proliferated on Indian online spaces over the past decade. History, as we have pointed out in the thesis, has become a contentious issue, playing out in different fields, sometimes in the visual representations of these leaders. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the publics studied in this thesis is its penchant for historicizing, driven by a strong urge to challenge and mock established historical scholarship (in the case of this thesis, historical personalities). Such historiographic efforts have the flavour of the unveiling a secret, a conspiracy to silence the 'truth' post-independence that has been finally been unveiled. Part of this suspicion of established historical canon also has its roots in popular communitarian engagements with historicity and facticity that is grounded contextually, as Sahana Udupa argues. The digital networks that we have pondered upon so extensively in this research leads to the deterritorialisation of these suspicions.

This thesis also did not pursue the thread of issue publics, or rather issue networks which, in some ways, challenges the applicability of the framework of publics to online spaces. Issue network tracking evolved from scholarship in Science and Technology Studies. It has rich potential to illuminate fascinating aspects of online politics. Thinking along the

lines of issue networks pre-dates the internet, all the way to American philosopher John Dewey. It is built upon the axiomatic foundations that in a democratic society strangers come together to generate an affect of political community around particular issues with regard to which they are positioned in different ways. In present times it has been carried forward by scholars such as Rogers and Noortje Marres[185], who are involved in studying how 'natively digital' phenomenon has broader social and political repercussions. Such engagements bring to the fore antagonisms inherent in the political. For Dewey and those who think along these lines, issue networks are what causes politics to happen. In its modern online iteration, it is the circulation of information through digital networks and the framing of issues takes place collectively by users in these networks. The analytical focus of issue network analysis is on the how issues, controversies and scandals transmit across the internet, and not so much on 'publics' or 'actors' involved.

A case could also be made for comparative and/or integrated studies of the online visuals this research has focussed on, and the rich corpora of offline visual materials bearing the figure of the politician such as posters, cut-outs, pamphlets etc. These are part of the quotidian visual landscapes and visual consumption in urban and rural areas across the nation. Some of these might bear the signs of interesting deployment by citizens. Below is a citizen with disability who had festooned his wheelchair with various artefacts to celebrate the victory of Arvind Kejriwal and the AAP in the 2020 elections in South Delhi on the day the election results had been announced:

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[185] See Marres, N. (2006) 'Net-Work Is Format Work: Issue Networks and the Sites of Civil Society Politics', in Dean, J., Anderson, J. and Lovink, G. (ed.) *Reformatting Politics: Information Technology and Global Civil Society*, Taylor & Francis; see also Marres, N. (2015) 'Why Map Issues? On Controversy Analysis as a Digital Method', *Science, Technology, & Human Values,* vol. 40, no. 5(5), pp. 655-686.

Fig. 2 (Photograph clicked by the author with permission)

Indeed, there might be corporeal entanglements and image-work involved in the other forms of self-expression deployed by these politicians, such as speeches and gestures in political rallies and meetings on a public stage, interviews with the print media and electronic media etc. An example that immediately springs to mind is the various forms in which citizens engage with the content of the PM's 'Mann ki Baat' broadcasts.

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