

**POPULIST LEADERSHIP AND INDIAN DEMOCRACY:
CASE STUDIES OF SELECT NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PARTIES
(2014-2021)**

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ABSTRACT

Populism dominates democratic politics across the world as a distinctive and powerful political phenomenon. Yet, inherent subjectivity defies any linear conception of this idea. It is understood as a set of ideas, strategy or a political-cultural approach shaping the discourse of electoral democracies. Despite the fluidity, few common attributes of populism do hold. The populist appeal makes an antagonistic societal division between the ‘virtuous people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ or the ‘threatening outsiders.’ It considers the institutions in democracy as impediments to the ‘real’ representation of the ‘true people.’ A charismatic leader directly makes an unmediated appeal to the masses using populist rhetoric by claiming to represent the ‘authentic people’ and marginalise the ‘evil other’ by overshadowing the institutional apparatus of democracy.

Studying a populist leader’s appeal is crucial to assess the impact of populist discourses in a democracy. India’s vibrant electoral democracy has witnessed such appeals through several leaders where political communication has been directly made to ‘the people’ by leaders using socio-economic and cultural registers to secure electoral support. Such appeals by the leader circumvents political intermediaries and democratic institutions. Populism, as a political strategy of the leader to mobilise electoral support by making compelling representation claims, is one of the major conceptual frameworks for analysing populism. This study sets the premise of the research on populist political leadership in India by looking at the ways in which the leaders appeal to the people, focussing on the supply side of populism. However, this study further expands the scope of the work to also include the demand side of populism in order to understand that what factors make the political communication of the populist leaders attractive to the people. As it is realised that populist communication between the leader and the people do not take place in a vacuum, this study also explores how the citizens’ perception on populist ideas about politics, society and welfare impacts the popular response towards the populist leadership appeals.

In this context, this research makes a comparative study of the populist appeal of three contemporary political leaders in India - Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal (2014 - 2021) with four objectives. First, it focusses on the political profile and communication of the three leaders to understand the supply side of populism. Second, it dissects the key factors that make populist appeal of these leaders acceptable to the people revealing the demand side of populism. Third, it captures the public perception on the populist

ideas on politics and society that provides a conducive context for populist leadership to thrive. Finally, research analyses the impact of populist leadership appeal on political, societal and institutional discourses of India democracy.

The study uses primary and second data sources, followed with mixed research methodology- statistical description and Discourse Analysis (DA), to present its research findings. The study, right at the outset, acknowledges that that populist elements or attributes are present in the political appeals of many other political leaders in India. So, apart from the three leaders in our study, there are several other politicians in the past and present in Indian politics, whose politics have also been labelled as populist by the political scientists. So, the central premise of this study is to look beyond whether a particular leader is populist or not. Since, certain populist beliefs are quite prevalent in different sections of the society, some element of populism can be found in most political appeals given its all-encompassing and magnetic pull. So, in this study, we look beyond this to understand what is the nature or substance of the populist appeal made by political leaders at the national and regional level before their constituencies and how is it impacting the political discourses in Indian democracy.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

In this context, the research intends to make a comparative study of populist leadership styles in contemporary Indian politics. The study selected three prominent political leaders in India – Narendra Modi, sitting Prime Minister of India, Mamata Banerjee, incumbent Chief Minister of the state of West Bengal in India and Arvind Kejriwal, the present Chief Minister of the state of Delhi, which is the national capital of India. All the three abovementioned leaders have been labelled as populists by the scholars and experts on populism. The study would look into the nature of the political appeal of incumbent populist leaders in India. This research would cover the time period between 2014 to 2021, a timespan in which Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal all have occupied power in their respective political spheres.

The novelty of this research lies in the fact that it intends to understand both the supply side as well as the demand side of populism by looking at how these populist leaders communicate with the people and by investigating why people positively respond to the populist appeal of the leaders. Most importantly, the study would help to understand the commonalities and differences in the populist political appeal of national and regional leadership in India. It will facilitate the understanding of the different categories or varieties of populist leadership appeals in India which can be used for comparative study on populism. Further, it would also look at

the nature and the impact of larger populist ideas regarding society and politics on the public imagination in India. Finally, this research will make an attempt to make a sincere contribution in understanding the impact of populist leadership appeals on the political, social and institutional discourses of Indian democracy.

RESEARCH GAPS

While the existing literature adequately addresses the questions on the nature of populism in democracies in general and particularly in India, the literature is largely concentrated on the fault lines that are conducive for populist politics to emerge. The major part of the literature also attempts to rigidly categorise the populist discourse in India and beyond, within the binaries of right and left ideological spectrums.

Few strands of the recent scholarship on populist politics in India have propounded conceptual frameworks of welfare populism, governmental populism and inclusive populism that transcends the binaries of right and left. While understanding the genesis of the populist phenomenon in Indian democracy is of paramount importance, the question of capturing the tangible and measurable impact of populism on the democratic institutions evades the existing literature. The literature is also largely silent on the question of exactly why the people get drawn towards populist appeal despite its many pretensions and unrealistic lofty claims of emancipation. So, attempts to understanding the demand side of populism is quite limited so far. Also, systematic studies to understand the salience of populist ideas on society, politics, welfare and leadership in the Indian public imagination, is much needed to comprehensively understand the appeal of populist leadership.

In the Indian context, in contemporary period, a set of focussed work on Modi's populist political style has been done since 2014. However, similar studies on the powerful regional political leaders who occupy power at the state-level and is crucially shaping Indian politics, needs more focused attention. In this context, a comparative study between national level populist leadership like Narendra Modi with the regional political stalwarts who are also touted as populists in the contemporary period, would be crucial. Given the multi-layered complex churning that is taking place in the political space of Indian democracy, it might be an opportune moment to delve deeper into the nature and kinds of populist political appeal that has thrived in India's electoral space. Moreover, going further, it is crucial to ask how has such populist political appeals impacted the political and public discourses in India? Why has certain

sections of electorates responded to these different varieties of populist appeals in different regions across different time periods?

Most importantly, what is it that the success of these populist appeals in India's electoral politics reveal about the kind of political socialisation and mobilisation that is galvanising the imagination of the voters? If populism is broadly perceived as an anti-institutional political instrument or vehicle for practicing more direct yet majoritarian democratic representation through electoral politics, is it that political mobilisation or political socialisation through non-populist programmatic institutional politics have lost its steam in democracies? Is it that the traditional idioms of emancipatory or developmental politics that democracies originally envisaged to deliver through representative politics, became challenging and hence populist appeals became more electorally palatable and socially acceptable grammar of political salvation in democracies? This study, through three case studies of Narendra Modi at national level and Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal at the state-level, intends to answer some of these questions on the nature and success of the populist leadership appeals and its impact on the political discourses in Indian democracy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

This research has made a comparative study to understand the populist appeal of three contemporary political leaders in Indian politics-Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal in the period 2014 to 2021. The study has five key research questions as follows:

- 1) What is the nature of the political communication of the populist leaders in India?
- 2) What are the key factors that make populist appeal of these leaders acceptable and attractive to the people in India?
- 3) What is the public perception on the populist ideas on politics and society in India? How has that shaped the appeal for populist leadership in Indian politics?
- 4) What are the commonalities and differences in the populist appeals of the leaders in this study?
- 5) How is the populist leadership appeal impacting the political, societal and institutional discourses of Indian democracy?

METHODOLOGY

Three kinds of data sources have been used in this study. First part of the study that includes the introductory chapter and the political profiling of the leaders, mostly uses secondary data sources. These data sources include books, research papers, online articles on populism, political leadership, Indian democracy, and voters' behaviour. It also includes memoirs and autobiographies, personal accounts, biographies, books, and analytical studies and articles revealing the personal background and political journey of Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal.

For the second part, in which the political communication of the three leaders have been recorded, primary sources like the speeches, interviews, news reports and legislative or parliamentary statements have been used. For the third part of the study in which public opinion on populist leadership appeals and populist political and societal ideas are needed, public survey, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews are conducted through fieldwork. This study has used mixed research that includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods. For the substantial section of the study that includes the first, second and half of the third part, Discourse Analysis (DA) as a qualitative research method have been used in the study. Discourse Analysis (DA) is the most suitable qualitative method to capture the nuances and complexities of the populist attributes identified in the leadership communication as well as expressed through public sentiment. As the method is designed "to identify patterns of language in use and explore the context or circumstances (participants, situations, purposes, outcomes) associated with the production of these patterns."

Borrowing from Trappes's framework, this study would adopt two approaches of DA. First, "a set of approaches probes the functions and structures of languages and as such adopt grammar-friendly dispositions towards texts." The speeches and communication of the leaders would be analysed to decipher its function in appealing of the emotions, aspirations and insecurities of the people. Second, are the "critical approaches" of Discourse Analysis "for investigating the power and politics of discourse" hidden in the verbal as well as other symbolic expressions "which would aim to expose the hidden effects of power." This, many a time, "leads to stigmatisation and marginalisation of the vulnerable and are concerned with issues of identity, dominance and resistance." Here, both the communication of the leaders as well as the responses from the people are critically analysed using the Discourse Analysis method. This approach is also extremely relevant in our study in order to understand how the populist

expressions and utterances from the leader has shaped the societal, political and institutions discourses in a democracy.

In the third part of the study, only for the data collected from the closed-ended questions in the public survey, have been quantified in percentages for simple descriptive analysis. As descriptive statistics provides for most simple method of presenting the quantitative research findings as it “describe the basic features of the data in a study. They provide simple summaries about the sample and the measures. As it allows “to present quantitative descriptions in a manageable form,” it is used for presenting the survey findings in this study. For the open-ended responses from the public, insights drawn from the FGDs and in-depth interviews are also analysed through discourse analysis as already mentioned above.

For this study, select election speeches, parliamentary and legislative speeches statement on key issues of governance and select interviews of these leaders between 2014-2021 have been recorded and their content have been analysed. The fieldwork for studying the public perception is done in three states- West Bengal, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. While Delhi and West Bengal are taken to understand the public sentiment of regional leaders like Arvind Kejriwal (Chief Minister (CM) of Delhi) and Mamata (Chief Minister (CM) of West Bengal), Uttar Pradesh (UP) is taken up to study Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi’s popular appeal, a state where BJP is dominant both in parliamentary and state election since 2014.

Using uncontrolled quota sampling method, a survey is conducted (both online and offline) amongst select respondents (381 respondents) of diverse social profile that includes students and young professionals, middle-aged and elderly and people working in the unorganised sector. Gender and urban-rural representation are kept in mind while selecting the sample for the survey. Apart from the survey, in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) have been conducted with common voters from diverse age and gender groups, party workers and local leaders of the three political parties relevant for this study (Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress and Arvind Kejriwal’s Aam Aadmi Party). Scheduled interviews and informal interactions have also been done with academicians, journalists, other experts who works on this subject. The findings of the study have been analysed using mixed methods. Descriptive analysis as a method is used to analyse the survey data with simple quantification (data representation in percentages) of some of the close-ended questions in the questionnaire. The qualitative data collected from content analysis of the speeches, interviews and statements along with open-ended public responses from surveys,

interviews and FGDs are used for Discourse Analysis, in order to provide a grounded theory on populism and political leadership in Indian democracy.

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The central objective of the study is to analyse the nature and impact of populist appeal of three political leaders in India – Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal spanning across the period between 2014 and 2021 (during the time all three have been in power). The study intends to understand the supply side of populism by looking at how these populist leaders communicate with the people and also the demand side of populism by investigating why people positively respond to the populist appeal of the leaders. Broadly, the study would help to understand the commonalities and differences in the populist political appeal of national and regional leadership in India. It will also make a crucial contribution by delving into the impact of populist leadership appeal on the political, social and institutional discourses of Indian democracy.

The political communication between the populist political leader and the people whom the leader considers to be their core electoral constituency and seeks to represent them, is the key element that shapes the discourse of populist politics. Such a discourse has three broad key aspects to it which is used as the conceptual framework of this study. First, the leader creates a constructed category of the ‘people’ as a moral and virtuous entity based on some specific socio-cultural and/or economic identity whose interest he claims to solely represent, delegitimising other leaders or parties. Such a definition of people is exclusive and keeps the sections whom the leader demarcates as the ‘enemy’ or the ‘other’ outside the legitimate and moral imagination of the ‘people.’ Second, it is important for the populist leader to possess the charisma to establish his emotive relationship with ‘the people’ by instinctively relating to their interests and claims to be their sole representative.

Third, the leader is the sole custodian of the people’s interest, directly communicates with the people, distributes material welfare to them and delivers governance overshadowing the rule-based institutions of democracy. These three aspects of populism are seen broadly in three ways in this study. First, how the three select leaders communicate with the people to bolster their populist appeal. Second, in what ways the people resonate with the populist appeal of the three leaders. Third, how are the broader populist beliefs and perceptions of the people impact the populist leadership appeal. The thesis is divided into seven chapter. In the first chapter, the theoretical framework encapsulating the conceptual, definitional and functional aspects of

populism, political leadership and democracy is discussed. The literature on evolution of populist politics and leadership in Indian democracy is reviewed and the premise for studying the three leaders is established.

After discussing the key tenets of the existing literature on populism, some of the crucial research gaps in the study of populist leadership in India are identified. Taking a cue from the existing research gaps, the main research questions of this study are provided. Then, the methodology and the research design for this study is discussed. In the second chapter, brief analysis of the political profile of the three political leaders covering their political journey has been done to carve out the populist characteristics of these personalities that has defined their political career that would inform the study of these leaders' populist appeal. The identification of the populist attributes in their political journey by studying how the leaders in this study self-fashion their public image and political journey through their memoirs, autobiographies and public statements about the making of their political career. Also, how they are understood in the existing literature that includes biographies and research analysis written by experts on the political life of these leaders, is also taken into consideration while penning down their political profiles. This sets a strong premise to study these three leaders under the populism framework.

Under chapter 3, the study delved into the nature of the political communication of the three leaders. It includes the analysis of the election speeches, interviews and legislative deliberations of these leaders. The discourse analysis of their political communication and political messaging provides insightful findings on the dominant populist attributes in their appeals to the people which includes strong anti-elitism, self-projection as plebian yet extraordinary, the ability to make assertive claims of true representation to multiple constituencies as 'constructed homogenous people' and the assurance of spectacular governance. Chapter 4 provides a case study that analyses the nature of political communication of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak for extrapolating the fundamental aspects of populism in their leadership style during the pandemic. As populist appeal is perceived to thrive as a corrective or redemptive force to assuage a crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a very crucial opportunity to understand how populists in government communicate with people and navigate the obligation of governmental accountability during an unprecedented health, economic and societal challenge like the pandemic.

Chapter 5 looks at the public perception of these three political leaders through limited public surveys, interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to understand how people look at these leaders and what are the key factors that drives the people towards their populist political appeal. Chapter 6 assesses public perception on the populist ideas of society, politics and welfare in order to explain how public affiliation towards the broader populist beliefs like anti-elitism, public apprehension regarding migrants and outsiders, disaffection with institutions of democracy and preference for strong leadership in a democracy shapes public support for populist leadership appeals in India. Finally, the conclusion presents the main findings of the study underlining the commonalities and differences in the populist appeal of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal, how their appeal is created and received by the people and its impact on the leadership, social and institutional discourses of Indian democracy. As all the three leaders have remained electorally very successful, it is crucial to understand what explains the mass appeal of their populist political discourse which this study has attempted to capture.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This study has focussed on the political communication from the leader to its people and how, in turn, the people have responded to the communication from their leader. As the leader and its 'people' do not interact with each other in a vacuum and is influenced by the broader societal ideas, beliefs and principles, people's perception on such populist ideas have also been studied. This study has revealed that it is these broader populist predilections towards politics, society and welfare shaped by public perceptions regarding and experiences with representative democracy, that also explains why a particular leader succeeds in galvanising the people through populist narratives.

As Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal functions on different political spectrums, the overlaps and differences in their populist appeals are important to capture. Modi, as a pan-India national leader of a national party and the sitting PM, has a nationwide appeal and deals with national political issues. Mamata Banerjee, as the founder and chief of a West Bengal-based political party, TMC and the current Chief Minister of the state, practises her political mainly within West Bengal as her party dominates the Bengal politics since 2011. Though Mamata's party has tried to expand to other states, she didn't seem to get much success with that till now. And Arvind Kejriwal's politics has started with him founding the AAP in Delhi and kickstarting their political journey as a Delhi-based party. Kejriwal's political identity has primarily been shaped as a Delhi leader and CM of Delhi. However, AAP has made swift gains in other north

Indian states and have also formed a government in the state of Punjab in 2022. So, Kejriwal, despite Delhi being his key political bastion, he is expanding his party's political footprint in few other states as well. So, the diverse contexts in which these leaders function makes this comparative analysis more interesting.

The first finding of this study is that Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal uses strong and visible populist attributes in their political appeal to their respective constituencies. There are thematic similarities yet substantive differences in their populist appeals that we would elaborate in the section below. Second, the context in which these leaders are making their appeals determines the success and reach of their populist politics. Also, the strong Manichean ethics (good versus evil) in their populist appeal tends to polarise the political and electoral discourses in India. Third, strong organisational presence and strength of political parties augments populist appeal of these populist leaders taken up in this study who gets party's unconditional support for being able to win elections for the party. It challenges the usual understanding that weak organisational structures of political parties give rise to populist personality cults whose charisma alone becomes instrumental for political mobilisation for the party. Fourth, as there is disillusionment with the functioning of the political institutions in democracy that has led to lower public trust in institutional efficiency, populist 'strong' leadership is seen as the most tangible force that can represent the politically alienated 'general will' and provide responsive governance as per the needs of the people.

Fifth, the study reveals, that not only the attractive claims of the leaders pull the people towards populist narratives. Rather, the public affiliation towards the broader populist beliefs like anti-elitism, insecurity regarding migrants and outsiders, disaffection with institutions of democracy and preference for strong leadership in a democracy, enhances public support for populist leadership appeals in India. The leaders in this study have demonstrated impressive political strategy of effectively projecting themselves as a 'non-elite; and 'outsider in the political establishment' before their constituencies, despite occupying governmental power as an incumbent. The study shows that another fundamental reason behind the success of the populist leaders seems to be the fact that in their political rhetoric, the supremacy of the common people- their wisdom, honesty, power, resilience- are consistently invoked with an overt promise of reviving the lost strength of popular sovereignty within the democratic political system. So, people's apathy is not against democracy but against the lack of responsiveness and the absence of true representation of their needs, identity and aspirations in the structures and processes of institutional democracy. However, the importance of democratic institutions like judiciary,

parliament and opposition to ensure governmental accountability is also present in the public's understanding of democracy.

Varieties of Populist Appeals in India

- ***Modi: Eclectic appeal based on aspirations***

For all the three political leaders, there has been very visible populist elements both in the way they communicate with the people and also the manner in which the people respond to their political appeal. The political appeal of these leaders has strong elements of self-fashioning as underdog as well as extraordinary, anti-elite and ability to make effective representation claims for 'the people' by distinctly appealing to various constituencies. Amongst all the three leaders, Modi's populist appeal seems to be most broad-based and hence eclectic in nature. Modi could appeal to the 'people' as the mascot of Hindutva and defender of the 'Hindu majority' against the sinister designs of the 'pseudo-secular' elite. At the same time, his personal background as someone who hailed from a poor family experiencing the hardships of poverty and a leader who emerged from the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), his appeal as representative of poor and marginalised communities who safeguards them from elite vested interests and provided the poor welfare with dignity, is strong and formidable.

By making confident, aggressive and convincing claims of taking unprecedented steps for safeguarding national security and national interests from the 'enemy nations and anti-national forces' and taking India's stature at the highest pinnacle of global stature under his leadership, his appeal amongst the nationalists is also very impactful. Lastly, the votaries of 'good and smart governance' who feels that governmental efficiency, digitally-driven developmental initiatives, aggressive infrastructural growth and investment-friendly policies are key to country's advancement, also finds their voice in Modi's political appeal. Hence, Modi has managed to project himself as a leader and representative for many categories of constructed 'people' distinctly as well as simultaneously, giving him a very broad spectrum of political support. His appeal, as a national political leader, transcends not only the various social categories but also many regions across India.

The context in which a leader is making his or her populist appeal plays a very important role in impacting the reach and success of the leadership's populist appeal to the people. As Modi, is the only national leader with pan-India support in our study, his populism transcends the limitations of regional dynamics to make his appeal to a cross-section of 'people' whom he

effectively claims to represent. His stature as a national leader, incumbent Prime Minister and member of a national party (BJP), gave him the impetus to make nationalistic claims of national revival, national security and civilisational glory, which is difficult for a regional leader like Mamata or Kejriwal to successfully claim. Modi's background as a committed and life-long RSS member burnished his credentials as a Hindutva mascot amongst the votaries of majoritarian political agenda. Modi's stint as a long-time Chief Minister of Gujarat also helped him to effectively propagate the coveted 'Gujarat Model' of development for the constituencies that demand efficient and more accountable governance from a national leader.

Especially, in the context of the series of corruption-scandals that besieged the then ruling incumbent at the Centre, UPA government, Modi's claim of having a tried and tested alternative model of Gujarat's 'good governance' captivated the people seeing in his appeal a beacon of hope for better governance and development. Lastly, and most importantly, Modi's ability to project his own humble background to channelise the pent-up frustration amongst the majority sections of people against the 'influential, rich, morally compromised dynastic elite' and making a convincing claim to put the 'immoral elite' in their place as an 'uncompromising outsider' leader in the political system, he earned a formidable 'moral legitimacy' for national political leadership in India since 2014. Hence, Modi's ability to instil the varied aspirations based on religion, nationalism, technocratic and efficient governance and dignified life for the poor, remains his major political strength defining his populist appeal.

- ***Mamata: Gendered appeal as a provider***

Mamata Banerjee's populist political appeal, despite having few thematic convergences with Modi, has quite a few differences in terms of its substance. The research has revealed that few key aspects define Mamata's political appeal in the political landscape of West Bengal. First, her identity as a woman leader and her evolution in public life with the label of *didi* (elder sister) strengthens her public perception as someone who can provide maternal care and protection. The feminine part of her character invokes this expectation from her constituency that she would act as a 'provider of public service' in politics. Second, her struggling childhood with financial challenges, with the responsibility of managing her family after untimely death of her father, cemented her image as a responsible and caring guardian. Third, her relentless political struggle, spirited and bold resistance and lonely fight on the streets against the mighty left front rule in Bengal, made her an indomitable figure, a 'mass leader' in Bengal politics. The fact that she faced gruesome instances of deadly attacks and physical assaults in the course

of her fight against the incumbent ruling left regime in the state, it has shaped her image as a battered yet resilient woman leader with extraordinary courage.

Besides, she could successfully overthrow the 34 years of Left Front rule in Bengal to take over as the CM and also over the years could successfully keep away the politically ascendant and mighty national ruling party, BJP from capturing power in Bengal, makes her a 'capable and successful leader.' As a woman leader, these achievements in politics without the support of any male mentor or family privilege, makes her a very rare and one of the most known 'self-made and courageous' woman politician in India in the perception of the people. Also, her performative self-fashioning as a simple, unsophisticated non-elite who has breached the high pedestals of power, hitherto dominated by the English-speaking aristocratic elite, invokes pride and admiration amongst the poor and unprivileged. These hardships, challenges and ability to thrive by overcoming these obstacles to reach the highest seat of power in Bengal politics, creates a moral legitimacy for her leadership in politics. Also, a slew of extremely popular government schemes and cash doles by Mamata government that targets various sections of poor and lower middle-class people, further enhances her public image as a provider of services to the poor.

Especially, the women-centric welfare schemes are perceived by the women constituency as Mamata's generous grants to them for empowering the poor women to live a life of dignity. Also, the position of Mamata as the topmost leader of her party on whose name all elections are fought and won and as a leader who has the final say in all matters of her party and her government, she is seen as the answer to all problems and challenges for her constituencies, be it any political or administrative complication. Also, as Mamata is the founder of her party, she being the architect of her party and the one who led its evolution to emerge as the dominant ruling party of Bengal, she personifies the party and the government of Bengal which is presently headed by her. As no other leader has yet emerged in Bengal who can match her stature and popularity as a mass leader, she remains the most prominent face of Bengal politics, invoking Bengali regional identity to her appeal. As her presence in Bengal politics and governance as the Chief Minister and head of the ruling party of the state remains ubiquitous, she almost embodies Bengal's politics to the outside world, owing to her hegemonic dominance in Bengal politics. Hence, Mamata's identity as an ordinary yet extraordinary woman who provides for justice, gives protection, arbiter disputes, fights with her opponents for the rights of her people embodies regional pride and grants welfare to her people, makes her an ultimate 'provider' in Bengal in the popular imagination of her supporters.

- ***Kejriwal: Transactional appeal on hope***

Arvind Kejriwal's populist appeal is seen to be very different from the ones of Modi and Mamata. Unlike Modi and Mamata, Kejriwal is not seen as a career politician who have been in politics right from the beginning of his political career. His identity as a middle class educated civil servant helped to build his image as a relatable 'common man' in Delhi. The fact that he left his lucrative job in bureaucracy to devote his life in political activism created the foundation for his moral legitimacy in politics. His giving up of a comfortable job in order to change the dysfunctional political system by getting into the turbulent waters of politics, made him a relatable figure for the educated middle class. As the middle class shares the frustration and disenchantment with the political system, his entry in politics appeared as 'one of their own' has gone out to take the pain to reform the system. His background as a civil servant who plunged into politics to reform it and his relentless claims to clean the political system, created enormous hope that he would do politics 'with a difference.' His launching of a new political party and rise to power have receded the political apathy and disaffection toward electoral politics for a sizeable section of citizens with a renewed hope that with Kejriwal's entry, something is changing in the politics for the better.

Kejriwal's categorical and overt call for making the political system more representative of the interests of the people and bringing the government closer to the common people, resonated amongst the public. His various strategies include seeking public opinion on key issues regarding his politics and governance, conducting *Janata darbars* or public assemblies to listen to the public grievances. This has raised hope in the people that Kejriwal is making efforts to bring the government and political establishment closer to the people. This hope of making politics cleaner and better, embodied in Kejriwal and his party, created his cult amongst the people. However, he has mobilised the people based on a hope of delivering governance which is more responsive to the people and promised to create a political culture which is bereft of the corruption prevalent in traditional political parties. So, there is perceptible and enormous public expectation from Kejriwal to relentlessly perform and deliver something 'new' in politics and governance in order to retain his public legitimacy for his presence in politics.

Also, Kejriwal's popular governmental initiatives have strengthened his public image as someone who delivers governance and keeps the promises that he makes to his electorate. His government's key initiatives include free electricity up to 200 units and free water up to 20,000 litres in a month to every household, free bus transport for women, and free pilgrimage tours

for the elderly in Delhi. Such initiatives, have played an important role in providing financial support to every poor and lower-middle class household in Delhi who struggles to cope up with the rising costs of living in Delhi. With such financial support that have contributed to save the everyday compulsory expenses of the urban poor in electricity, water and bus conveyance for women, Kejriwal's appeal as an 'true' ally of the poor bolstered. Also, Kejriwal government's initiatives in transforming the public-school education both in terms of infrastructure and quality as well as establishment of Mohalla clinics that provide free primary healthcare to all, have strengthened Kejriwal's appeal as a leader who wants to provide a life of dignity for the poor. As good education and quality healthcare are extremely basic prerequisites for a dignified life, such efforts have endeared Kejriwal to the lower-income people in Delhi as he is seen as a leader who cares for them. Kejriwal's ability to promote the 'Delhi model of governance' as his key political capital helped the party to find political ground in other states in India apart from Delhi like in Punjab, Goa and Gujarat amongst other regions.

In 2022, Kejriwal's party could successfully vanquish the ruling incumbent, the Congress party in the state in Punjab, and form AAP government in the state with AAP leader Bhagwant Mann as the CM. This has been an unprecedented development in India politics for a barely one-decade old regional party to capture power in two states. Even in Punjab, AAP's political narrative of being a 'party with difference' who would focus solely on the issues of civic governance like they have done in Delhi, made them a credible alternative force. AAP's ability to successfully tap the public grievances against the traditional political forces in the state like the Congress party and Shiromani Akali Dal-BJP combine alliance in Punjab, raised public hope for getting better governance if AAP is elected to power. As the 'fastest growing political start-up' in India, AAP's sole focus on providing real and better every day civic governance to the people and being a new political force outside the traditional political establishment, AAP became a viable political alternative for many. However, Kejriwal's image as a provider of civic governance to the people have largely confined his electoral appeal to the sub-national level till now.

His party's limited political success at the national elections in the last one-decade bears testimony to the fact that Kejriwal's appeal has not consolidated much as a national leader. In his political bastion of Delhi, where his party is in power at the state level for over last one decade, Kejriwal's party have failed to win even one seat in the Lok Sabha elections in Delhi since its inception. BJP, under Modi's leadership, seems to have occupied the appeal of being the preferred national leader in Delhi, as BJP won all seats in the last few national elections in

Delhi. The popular presence of a national leader like Modi in the popular imagination of Delhi electorates and Kejriwal's appeal confined to being a provider of good civic governance in Delhi, limits Kejriwal's populism at the state level. Unlike Kejriwal, a sizeable section of Mamata's support-base have expressed their aspiration of seeing a leader from Bengal playing an important role in the national politics. This is reflected in the impressive electoral performance of Mamata's party TMC in Bengal in the last few Lok Sabha elections that coincides with Mamata's stint as the CM of Bengal, with the 2019 election as an exception. This support for Mamata at the national level within Bengal, despite leading a regional party, is largely because of the regional pride that her political appeal is consist of. With Kejriwal, such regional sentiment still seems to be lacking in Delhi in the national election despite his efforts as for the majority, nationally dominant political leaders like BJP's Modi and Congress's Rahul Gandhi captures voters' imagination in the national capital of Delhi. So, the political context matters immensely in determining the scope and breadth of the populist appeal of a political leader.

- ***Populist Appeal during COVID-19***

One crucial contribution of this study has been an attempt to study the political communication of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal during an unprecedented crisis like COVID-19 pandemic. The study has revealed three major trends of populist communication during a crisis situation like COVID-19. First, during such an unprecedented crisis, the propensity of populist leaders to further consolidate their personality cult as 'only saviors or messiah' capable of mitigating the crisis, was further reinforced. For Modi, as the Prime Minister and national leader, he projected himself more as a patriarch and guiding light with motivational repertoire for the vast sections of panic-stricken populace amidst the pandemic gloom. His appeal is labelled as *Patrimonial Appeal*.

For Mamata, her feminine identity as a 'caring elder sister' was demonstrated in full-swing during the pandemic as she delved into the nitty-gritty of governance, healthcare and administration to serve her people as the 'defender' of Bengal. Kejriwal, true to his usual image as governance provider, focused on everyday governance services including healthcare as his personal duty during the pandemic, even by 'putting' his own life at stake. So, Mamata and Kejriwal who delved into the nitty-gritty of governance during crisis, their appeal can be termed as *Intimate Leadership Appeal*. Populist machismo during a crisis like COVID-19 by projecting themselves as an indispensable fighter against the virus was done by all the three leaders.

Second, as the crisis aggravated, the insidious populist design of antagonistic politics to attribute the blame to the ‘other,’ was seen in full swing both from Central as well as State leadership. However, the visibility and centrality of the populist political leadership also ensured, to some extent, some form of political accountability during a critical crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Party organisation and populist leadership

Though the populism literature makes a strong argument that populist leader thrives in a party which has a weak organisational structure, the findings from this study intends to problematise, if not entirely challenge this argument. It is true, that all the three leaders in the purview of our study have strong hold over their political parties and they prefer to control their parties in a centralised manner. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which had quite a few notable leaders at the national level for a long time, became subservient to the charismatic aura of Narendra Modi as he became the tallest leader of the party since 2014.

Modi’s ability to bring the party into unprecedented political prominence by getting parliamentary majority on its own for the first time in 2014 since BJP’s formation, bolstered his authority and stature within the party as its *de facto* supreme leader. Also, under Modi’s stint as PM, BJP could aggressively expand its political footprints in several states much beyond its traditional stronghold. Also, appointment of Modi’s long-time close aide, Amit Shah, as the party president is seen as a major step in brightening the electoral prospects of the BJP since 2014. Shah is widely credited for his political acumen, strategic vision and electoral pragmatism for establishing the dominance of BJP at the national as well as state elections in the last one decade, transforming BJP into the central pole of India’s national politics. Hence, the credit of getting the party such unparalleled political success has been attributed to Modi’s popular charisma and Shah’s strategic prowess. Hence, electoral success became the key factor that gave legitimacy to Modi-Shah to take control of the party and determine all the important party decisions. The party cadres of the BJP who were contacted during the field work for this study seems to be very comfortable with party decisions being taken by Modi-Shah duo as they feel that both the leaders know how to get people’s support for winning elections.

However, the party cadres and workers have shared how they play an instrumental role in taking the messages of their leader to the people. BJP, has a robust organisational machinery which has been complemented by the dense network of RSS and other Sangh Parivar affiliate organisations. Insights from the party workers have revealed which have been complemented

by secondary literature about how the efficient organisational structure of BJP and RSS have helped to further the cult of Modi to every household. BJP's social media team has also played a pivotal role in penetrating the unified and coordinated political message from their supreme leader, Modi. TMC and AAP also is known to have strong organisational presence in their main regions of influence.

Mamata Banerjee's overarching influence over her party stems from two factors. First, she is the founder and the central force that has built the party brick-by-brick to make it emerge as the dominant ruling party in Bengal. Second, she is the biggest vote catcher of the party who has salvaged the party electorally in every election. Hence, the party leadership and the cadres have been absolutely subservient to Banerjee's directives and decisions. But a well-oiled strong party machinery has been critical to solidify the cult of Mamata in every household by propagating her political message and her government schemes. Also, the party organisation is crucial to ensure proper coordination on election day at booth level so that people are encouraged to vote and party's electoral prospects are not jeopardised by the opposition. Similar to TMC, AAP has also been dependent on the cult of Arvind Kejriwal as he has been the face of the party as its founder and leader since its inception. Though the party had few other key figures in the initial period of AAP's formation, their differences with Kejriwal led to their exit consolidating Kejriwal's position as the *de facto* leader of AAP. Even with the emergence of Bhagwant Mann as AAP's leader and CM of Punjab, Kejriwal's pre-eminent role as the party boss didn't get threatened. AAP's quick success in electoral politics have been attributed to its diffused grassroots level organisational party apparatus which could take the message of the party and its leadership to the people.

With the absence of big corporate funding, AAP's grassroots level party workers, through local-level party outreach activities could successfully manage effective campaign for the party. AAP's party cadres have also expressed utmost content with taking the message of their leader, Kejriwal to the people as they feel only their leader can connect the party with the voters effectively. Hence, well-structured organisational machinery of the party can co-exist with powerful and all-encompassing populist cult leaders. The fundamental reason for the party organisation to act according to the whims and fancies of these leaders' stem from their ability to win elections for the party. Hence, the argument that well-organised parties obstructs the rise of populist leaders needs to be reconsidered and needs a separate and focussed research investigation. So, it is not the absence of party organisation but a party organisation which doesn't have any institutional autonomy to make collective decisions for the party and have a

conformist attitude to the diktats of the leadership cult, gives way to populist leaders to thrive. Hence, it would possibly safer to argue that not complete absence or weak party organisation rather a well-organised yet conformist party machinery towards the leader who can win elections for the party, paves the way for populist leadership cult.

Institutional disaffection, crisis in democratic representation and the rise of populist leaders

It is clear that these populist leaders in our study looms large over their party machinery, invokes their non-elite yet extraordinary personality and promises true representation to their constructed categories of 'virtuous people' and claims spectacular governance to those people. The dominance of the populist leaders is attributed to their electoral success because the leaders are seen as the most tangible beacon of hope for the people. These leaders make successful claims of truly representing their constituencies in the structure of power and governance by ending the immoral and illegitimate capture of the democratic institutions by the embedded elite. Such claims find resonance with the people due to the deep-rooted public anger and suspicion towards the elite capture of democratic institutions.

As a result, a dominant perception is built amongst most people, largely the lower and middle classes, that the democratic institutions and elected representatives no longer serves their interest nor do the institutions represent their voices in the governance and policy-making processes. They believe that such structures have been captured by the affluent elite who has unholy nexus with the political establishment. As such institutions, laden with corruption and inefficiency, becomes unable to serve the common people, they become alien to the masses. The people starting feeling despondent about the fact that they don't matter in the system. Such a vacuum and disconnect between the democratic institutions and the people is filled up with such populist leaders who claims to emerge from the masses as non-elite and promises to provide true representation to the people in politics, even if it requires overshadowing the corrupt institutions of democracy. They tap the deep-rooted discontent in the people and hails the people as the 'supreme, righteous, courageous and wise' in a democracy, giving the people a sense of revived dignity and self-esteem. Hence, the populist leadership becomes a strong beacon of hope for a major section of people who find their voice and representative in the populist leaders like Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal for a variety of reasons.

The supporters of these three leaders are so enamoured by such populist leaders that though they feel that these leaders are most responsible for providing representation and governance

to the people and are credited for doing so, limitations in their performance are attributed not to the leaders but to the institutional apparatus called government. Hence, people tend to take a more generous stand even if the populist leaders falter in governance. Because, in many aspects, the presence of these leaders in the structures of power itself is seen as biggest act of representation of the people, regardless of their tangible performance in the office of governance. As the connect with the populist leaders mostly goes beyond real performance in office and mostly is contingent upon the political projection of their conduct which is mixed with intense emotive connect between the leader and the people, populists often evade democratic accountability, barring extraordinary situations.

Interestingly, though people look disappointed with the performance of the institutions in democracy, they realise and acknowledge the importance of institutions like parliament, judiciary, opposition parties and media for demanding governmental accountability in an electoral democracy. Hence, as revealed in studies in other parts of the world, dominance of populist leaders in Indian democracy is not because of people's rejection of democracy as a political system or espousal of authoritarian rule, but due to the people's disappointment with institutions and processes of democracy. Hence, they seem to support the idea of democracy and understand the role of institutions in democracy. But they desperately search for true democratic representation in the populist leaders who claims to address the long-standing grievances and representation crisis of the people within the democratic political system.

This study also corroborates the need to look at populist appeal as a discursive political discourse. It's true that seeing populism merely as a political strategy of a charismatic leader and as a political ideology, is inadequate for understanding its depth in a society as diverse and complex as Indian society. Rather, sincere attempt to understand populism as a discursive frame which has attained the ubiquity of a discourse would be helpful in adequately unpacking the nuances of populist leadership appeal in Indian democracy. Also, India as a vast country with several states, ethnic and regional diversities, understanding the different shades of populism in different other parts of the country by focussing on other leaders which this study couldn't include, would be very significant in building the populism research in India.

Also, a more granular and in-depth investigation into understanding the public perception on populist appeal with a broader and deeper research scope can open new insights on populism in India. However, this study makes a sincere and concerted attempt to make a rounded comparative analysis on populist leadership at national and regional level, their appeal amongst

the people in different states and on the broader populist societal discourse in Indian democracy. The findings of this study might be a stepping stone and provide impetus for further investigation and more nuanced analysis of populist leadership in Indian democracy.

Signature of Supervisor

Dated

Signature of Candidate

Dated