

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

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

Submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of

Prof. Partha Pratim Basu (Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University)

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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## **Abstract**

Populism dominates democratic politics across the world as a distinctive 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 appeals to the masses with populist rhetoric by claiming to represent the ‘authentic people’ and marginalise the ‘evil other.’

Studying a populist leader’s appeal is crucial to assess the impact of populist discourses in a democracy. India 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. It circumvents political intermediaries and democratic institutions.

This research is 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 to present its research findings.

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## Abbreviations

AITC	-	All India Trinamool Congress
TMC	-	Trinamool Congress
BJP	-	Bharatiya Janata Party
RSS	-	Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh
ABVP	-	Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad
INC	-	Indian National Congress
AAP	-	Aam Aadmi Party
FGD	-	Focus Group Discussion
UPA	-	United Progressive Alliance
NDA	-	National Democratic Alliance
UP	-	Uttar Pradesh
WB	-	West Bengal
CPI(M)	-	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
LS	-	Lok Sabha
RS	-	Rajya Sabha
MLA	-	Member of Legislative Assembly
MP	-	Member of Parliament
VS	-	Vidhan Sabha
EC	-	Election Commission
ED	-	Enforcement Directorate
CBI	-	Central Bureau of Investigation
SC	-	Supreme Court
NCR	-	National Capital Region

JNU	-	Jawaharlal Nehru University
NRC	-	National Register for Citizens
CAA	-	Citizenship Amendment Act
SC	-	Scheduled Caste
ST	-	Scheduled Tribe
CM	-	Chief Minister
PM	-	Prime Minister
DA	-	Discourse Analysis
CSDS	-	Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
RJD	-	Rashtriya Janata Dal
SP	-	Samajwadi Party
BSP	-	Bahujan Samaj Party
MGR	-	Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran
MNREGA	-	Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
JP	-	Jayaprakash Narayan

# **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Populism as a distinctive political phenomenon has emerged to dominate the political landscape of countries throughout the world. However, it is difficult to imagine a linear monolithic conception of populism as it remains, in Gallie's term, one of the 'essentially contested concepts.'<sup>1</sup> The inherent subjectivity, fluidity and ambiguity along with competing foundational counter-claims around the term make populism a concept with a plethora of variegated connotations. However, notwithstanding the idiosyncrasies within the broader understanding of populism, the dominant conception of populist politics comprises of a broad set of combined attributes. That includes a discourse on homogenous 'authentic and pure' 'people' against the 'other' and the 'corrupt elite' consolidating an anti-establishment rhetoric mobilised mostly through a personality cult of leadership and centralization of power in the authority of the leader.<sup>2</sup> These attributes collectively constitute the overarching and prominent theme in the literature on populism which is understood as a political strategy of claim-making deployed by leaders for effective mass mobilisation in their support.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that populist political discourse has proved to be instrumental in obtaining mass legitimacy<sup>4</sup> for political movements, regimes and leaders across all political systems.<sup>5</sup> But as electoral mobilisation remains a foundational imperative in democratic regimes, populist political style is increasingly defining the grammar of politics in many democracies across the world. Studying populism in democracies is not only important because of its ubiquitousness in electoral mobilisation, but also because democracy is ridden by an intractable conundrum which populism seeks to respond to or take advantage of.<sup>6</sup> Quite a few democracies of the world, on one hand, commendably observe (despite its shortcomings) procedural democratic practices like holding of regular elections, universal adult franchise and providing political

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<sup>1</sup> W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 56 (1955–56): 167–98.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Kapferer and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, *Democracy's Paradox: Populism and Its Contemporary Crisis* (New York: Berghahn Publisher, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: 'Populism' in the Study of Latin American Politics," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.

<sup>4</sup> Christo Pretorius and Radoslav Valev, "Populist Authoritarianism in China: National and Global Perspectives," *European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)*, May 2, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0055>

<sup>5</sup> Natalia Mamonova, "Vladimir Putin and the Rural Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Russia," *OpenDemocracy*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/vladimir-putin-and-rural-roots-of-authoritarian-populism-in-russia/>.

<sup>6</sup> Valerio Fabbrizi, "What Does Populism Mean for Democracy? Populist Practice, Democracy, and Constitutionalism," *Ethics & Global Politics* 16, no. 4 (2023).

rights to its citizens and existence of democratic institutions.<sup>7</sup> But, on the other hand, democracies faces a challenge in consolidating substantive democratic practices and ethos that includes level of political consciousness, nature of political deliberations and extent of participation and meaningful representation of the people in the political processes, extent of freedom of expression and freedom of press actually practiced. Also, the presence of robust civil society institutions, extent of equitable distribution of resources, empowerment of local self-government, status of minorities, independence and effective functioning of judiciary and other public institutions are other aspects of substantive markers of democracy.<sup>8</sup> In the light of such a conundrum between the promise and practise of democracy, the rise of the variegated strands of populist political appeal across countries appears to have the potential of possibly impacting both the procedural as well as substantive aspects of democracy which needs to be closely studied. Scholars have pointed out that the populist fixation on reestablishing true popular sovereignty means populism emerges when the democratic practice falls short of the democratic ideal.<sup>9</sup> That is when political elites are revealed to be corrupt and the political system is perceived as ineffective and unresponsive to the demands, needs and aspirations of common people.<sup>10</sup> But that is also when the everyday realities of how representative democracy works in practice leave too little room for ‘the voice of the people’.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, it is important to investigate whether the prevalence of populist political culture affects democratic consolidation? If yes, in what ways does it alter or disrupt the established discourses in the political culture in democracies? Also, how are the dominant strands of populism impacting the functioning of democratic institutions? Most importantly, what are the possible factors that make the populist appeal attractive to the people? India, as a vibrant and diverse electoral democracy, has seen the rise of many powerful charismatic political leaders

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<sup>7</sup> Ted Piccone, “The Compounding Rule of Law Crisis,” *Brookings*, November 10, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-compounding-rule-of-law-crisis/>.

<sup>8</sup> Massimo Tommasoli, “Rule of Law and Democracy: Addressing the Gap Between Policies and Practices,” *UN Chronicle* 49, no. 4 (December 2012), <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/rule-law-and-democracy-addressing-gap-between-policies-and-practices>.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies*, March 1997, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9248.00184>.

<sup>10</sup> Kirk A. Hawkins, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, and Ioannis Andreadis, “The Activation of Populist Attitudes,” *Government and Opposition* (Cambridge University Press), September 13, 2018, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/activation-of-populist-attitudes/DB533748425A57B5895BB28FB3CBA34E>

<sup>11</sup> Peter Mair, “Representative versus Responsible Government,” Working Paper 2009/08, *Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne*, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/12533>.

with populist attributes since its inception as a multi-party democracy. As India has a federal political structure, extremely powerful and popular populist leaders have emerged and thrived in Indian politics both at the national as well as state level. Indian democracy, which has a trust with charismatic leadership and populist political attributes with an extremely diverse and complex socio-cultural and economic setting, would be an extremely interesting and important case for studying populist leadership and its impact on 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 would select 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.<sup>12</sup> The study would look into the nature of the political appeal of incumbent populist leaders in India. The study 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 populist ideas on the public imagination in India. Finally, this research will make a significant contribution in understanding the impact of populist leadership appeals on the political, social and institutional discourses of Indian democracy.

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<sup>12</sup> Shruti Vyas, "Indians bored with politics of ideology. Populism speaks—from Modi to Kejriwal," *The Print*, March 30, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/indians-bored-with-politics-of-ideology-populism-speaks-from-modi-to-kejriwal/893547/>

Shiveshwar Kundu, "Mamata vs Modi: Competitive populism will be the flavour of Bengal's Assembly poll next year," *NewsLaundry*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/08/04/mamata-vs-modi-competitive-populism-will-be-the-flavour-of-bengals-assembly-poll-next-year>

## Literature Review

### Definitional Conundrum

The existing literature reveals a normative contestation in defining the term populism.<sup>13</sup> As Weyland has pointed out, “inherently populism is a shifty concept that a number of scholars have compared to a chameleon as it constantly changes “colors” and threatens to escape analytical grasp.<sup>14</sup> As soon as scholars are confident that they have encircled it within their definitional snares, it resurfaces in a different form in another corner of the impenetrable jungle of politics.”<sup>15</sup> In most rudimentary terms, populist appeal claims to wrest democratic power back from the ‘corrupt elite’ and give power back to the people, reinforcing the supremacy of the general will.<sup>16 17</sup> The ‘people’ are often defined by the leader in tandem with his political project of appealing to certain sections whom he wants to represent as his political constituency. Such a construction of people is made in opposition to the constructed ‘enemy or threatening other’ whom the populist appeal seeks to vilify or mobilise against. However, it is very difficult to find a monolithic and linear definition of populism.<sup>18</sup>

However, scholars of populism have provided for a plethora of conceptual categories and lens to define and contextualise populism. For instance, Margaret Canovan in her seminal work *Populism* (1981) also noted that “there is no one thing called populism but there are certain characteristics which are central to most definitions of populism” which she broadly categorises into two types-agrarian populism based on a socio-economic movement amongst rural populace and political populism in which political phenomenon like direct democratic practices, “mobilisation of mass passions, to the idealisation of the man on the streets, or to politicians’ attempts to hold together shaky coalitions in the name of the people or a phenomenon in which the tension between the elite and the grassroots loom large” have been included. Canovan further breaks this into three types of agrarian and 4 types of political populism. Amongst those categories, most relevant for understanding the broad trend of

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<sup>13</sup> Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Paul Taggart, *Populism*, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000

<sup>15</sup> Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: ‘Populism’ in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.

<sup>16</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 3 (2004): 541–63.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: Junction, 1981).

leadership-driven populist appeal is termed as ‘politician’s populism’ that entails “a broad non-ideological coalition building that draws on the unificatory appeal of the ‘people’.”<sup>19</sup> Other scholars have also defined populism as a political discourse<sup>20 21</sup>, political frame<sup>22</sup>, political style, mode of identification<sup>23</sup> and language.

Broadly, the recent scholarship has categorised populism by using three approaches- ideational (Mudde)<sup>24</sup>, politico-strategic (Weyland)<sup>25</sup> and socio-cultural (Ostiguy)<sup>26</sup> approach. First, populism in a broad array of scholarship has defined it as a set of ideas. As “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous 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.”<sup>27</sup> Broadly it includes creating two antagonistic groups- people versus ‘elite and other’, the primacy of direct/unmediated rule of the general will embodied through a leader pitted against the establishment. The ‘people’ is perceived as the embodiment of authentic general will and the elite is dubbed as an immoral and corrupt force. Whereas, the ‘other’ is defined in opposition to the ‘people’ who are discriminated mostly on ethnic lines and are seen as a threat to the interest of the people or general will. The general will that is represented by the ‘people’ are constructed as an undifferentiated homogenous group in which all internal differences within the group are overshadowed or labelled as artificial by the populist discourse. Also, “every call for policies that benefit specific groups, even if it is to remove existing inequalities (Sawer, 2004), is

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (London: Junction, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> David Howarth, “Populism or Popular Democracy? The UDF, Workerism, and the Struggle for Radical Democracy in South Africa,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 202–23.

<sup>22</sup> Michael J. Lee, “The Populist Chameleon: The People’s Party, Huey Long, George Wallace, and the Populist Argumentative Frame,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 4 (2006): 355–78.

<sup>23</sup> Francisco Panizza, “Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 1–31.

<sup>24</sup> Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Christobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Kurt Weyland, “Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Christobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, “Populism: A Socio-cultural Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Christobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 3 (2004): 541–63.

denounced as ‘special interest politics.’”<sup>28</sup> Ideational approach notes that “populists often claim to base their policies on common sense, i.e. the result of the honest and logical priorities of the (common) people.<sup>29</sup> Anyone who opposes common sense is, by definition, devious and part of the corrupt elite.”<sup>30</sup>

Second, in the political strategy approach, Weyland emphasises on leadership factor as he defines populism “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.”<sup>31</sup> Mammone further observes that “where personalistic leaders put vote maximization ahead of ideological purity can we speak of populism.<sup>32</sup> Personalistic leadership that takes ‘a flexible, opportunistic route to political mobilisation qualifies as populist. Hence, the strategy-based definition helps to delimit the extension of “populism.”<sup>33</sup> Populism poses a threat to democracy in the sense that tough it claims to empower “the people”, but in reality, it seeks to bestow this popular sovereignty to a political leader whose personality cult dominates the political landscape further disempowering the citizenry. Populist leaders are differentiated from other ideologically driven authoritarian leaders as populists do not try to re-mould the people via eugenics, impose ideological homogeneity, and force their followers into all-encompassing mass organizations. Whereas fascism and National Socialism quickly established full-scale despotism, populism hovers in the hybrid zone between democracy and “competitive” authoritarianism, making it a different political phenomenon.

Third, in the political-cultural approach, populism is seen as an appeal in the realm of ‘low’ politics. The low, in contrast to ‘formalistic and sober’ high politics, is more concrete and into immediacy. “Perceptions of *immediacy* have important implications with respect to establishing relations with (the) people. Personalism can also be seen as warmer and easier to relate to. The low generally does not worry much about appearing improper in the eyes of the

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<sup>28</sup> M M. Sawer and B. Hindess, eds., *Us and Them: Anti-Elitism in Australia* (Perth: API Network, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Hans-Georg Betz, “Introduction,” in *The New Politics of the Right*, ed. Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Martin Ridge, “The Populist as a Social Critic,” *Minnesota History* 43, no. 8 (1973): 297–302.

<sup>31</sup> Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: ‘Populism’ in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.

<sup>32</sup> Andrea Mammone, “The Eternal Return? Faux Populism and Contemporization of Neo-Fascism Across Britain, France, and Italy,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17, no. 2 (2009): 171–92.

<sup>33</sup> Matthijs Rooduijn, “The Nucleus of Populism,” *Government and Opposition* 49, no. 4 (2014): 573–99.

international community, at times even enjoying it.<sup>34</sup> From an institutionalist standpoint, that is to say that political authority on the low is institutionally less *mediated*, as mediation involves a more sublimated type of practice, whereas behavior on the low (both political culturally and socio-culturally) is certainly more crass and direct.” Lévi-Strauss’s (1983) famous structural anthropological contrast between “the raw” and “the cooked” can be seen as an appropriate metaphor for low and high politics with populism traversing in the ‘low’ world.<sup>35</sup> Populism can be called “the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting of the low.”<sup>36</sup> This approach highlights the “connection with, and representation of, the “authentic,” “deserving,” and “neglected” people of “this place (native)”. The moral indignation is that “the people” have been hurt, damaged, ignored, “unrepresented”—not that their “purity” is not sovereign.” If populism is the expression of a plebeian-native “grammar,” then not only will it be at ease with the “low” but, in an antagonistic way, it will flaunt it— though it may not be “proper” or “politically correct.” In claiming to represent, and at times to embody, a—neglected—true “us-ness,” it flaunts a politically or socially “unpresentable Other.”<sup>37</sup>

In other words, the political-cultural approach of populism paves the way for the low politics, a political narrative that reflects the concerns of the common people and celebrates the ‘non-elite’ and plebeian ways of political expression in order to truly represent the ‘virtuous common people’ and not the ‘corrupt aristocratic elite’ who has wrongly hegemonized the political system. Broadly speaking, these three approaches broadly encapsulate the recent strands of scholarship on populism. However, notwithstanding the varieties of the populism framework, it’s a political movement that makes a strong and compelling moral claim to reorient the idea and practise of popular sovereignty across democracies.

### **Populism or Populisms?**

Not only are there varied approaches to study populism, the substance and narratives of the populist appeals also have different strands. Populism, due to its fluidity, can traverse across the ideological divide of the left and the right. Populism as an empty signifier or a thin-centred ideology, can combine both with right-wing’s xenophobic and nativist appeal as well as left-

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<sup>34</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, *Populism: A Socio-cultural Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked (Mythologiques, Book 1)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Ostiguy, *Populism: A Socio-cultural Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*

wing narratives of social-egalitarianism.<sup>38</sup> For most cases, populist political appeals are often difficult to be neatly defined as left or right and is comprised of multiple competing and overlapping simultaneous claims ranging from radical reforms, inclusiveness, empowerment and cultural exclusivity.<sup>39</sup> Whether the appeal is from the right or the left political positioning, the phenomenon of populism ostensibly emanates from a deep-rooted crisis of representation and unfulfillment of popular aspirations despite the tall promises of electoral democracy.<sup>40</sup> Hence, we can point out some of the key elements that are constitutive of the populist appeal. The centrality of populism lies in a fluid creation and invocation of a category ‘the people’ as a political subject especially in a situation that is perceived or projected as a political, socio-economic or cultural ‘crisis’<sup>41</sup> for democracy.<sup>42</sup> Populism identifies the will of hitherto suppressed authentic ‘people’ with justice and morality, according legitimacy to its cause to mitigate the ‘moral/political/socio-economic and cultural crisis that politics is grappling with.’<sup>43</sup> In this context, populist movement comes as a set of radical and spectacular political actions during this ‘crisis politics’ which requires ‘redemptive’ corrective measures for the ‘true emancipation of the people.’

Populist appeal emphasises that such measures should be a departure from ‘routine’ politics of banal ‘pragmatic’ incrementalism of institutional democracies.<sup>44</sup> In simpler terms, as traditional democratic politics has been tainted by corruption, institutional decay, delays in delivering governance and inadequate representation of the public, triggering a crisis emanating from socio-political disaffection with institutional politics of democracy. Populism claims to return the lost power of democracy back to the people (*demos*) from the corrupt elite

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<sup>38</sup> Karin Priester, *Rechter und Linker Populismus* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Dani Filc, “Populism: Left or Right?” *The Loop*, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/populism-left-or-right/>

<sup>40</sup> Bruce Kapferer and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, eds., *Democracy’s Paradox: Populism and Its Contemporary Crisis* (New York: Berghahn Publisher, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Paul J. Maher et al., “The Many Guises of Populism and Crisis: Introduction to the Special Issue on Populism and Global Crises,” *Political Psychology* 43, no. 5 (2022), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12840>.

<sup>42</sup> Vasiliki Tsagkroni, “Populism and Crisis: Exploring the Interplay of Political Dynamics,” *OXPOL*, February 28, 2024, <https://blog.politics.ox.ac.uk/populism-and-crisis-exploring-the-interplay-of-political-dynamics/>.

Şenol Arslantaş and Düzgün Arslantaş, “Populism and Crisis: Evidence from the Periphery of Europe,” *Mediterranean Politics* 29, no. 3 (2024), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2023.2180604>.

Paul Taggart, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies*, March 1999.

who have for long held the political establishment under siege.<sup>45</sup> Using this anti-establishment rhetoric, populism encapsulates a condition that apparently demands revulsion of conventional and embedded discourse of institutional democratic politics that is accused of embodying moral erosion, illegitimacy and inefficiency for creating a truly representative democracy.<sup>46</sup> The populist charge is that the corrupt elite only works in favour of the special interests of minority sections of vested interest i.e. *the other*, that might include big business, aristocracy, minorities, immigrants amongst other groups.<sup>47</sup> Hence, it purportedly attempts/claims to build a mass-based democratic movement by mobilising a considerable section of populace for eliciting support against the ‘elite’ and the ‘other’. Such a movement is driven by a morally higher political discourse for capturing governmental power for replacing the decadent system with an arrangement that is responsive to the interests of the majority ‘authentic people.’ Such a narrative deploys Manichean ethics that shapes the populist grammar in which the politics is projected as a battle between the ‘good’ and ‘evil.’<sup>48</sup>

So, broadly speaking, populism as a political project emerges apparently to offer a corrective to the depravations of representative democracy.<sup>49</sup> Hence, it introduces an overwhelming moral element to the conception of populism that seeks to emancipate the pure (general will) and decimate the evil (the elite and the other).<sup>50</sup> One key element of such populist movements remain that it is led by and often personified in a charismatic leader who alone claims to represent the will of the ‘authentic people’ having the gusto to fight against the corrupt elite and outsiders in order to give back power to the people (general will). Though the ideational rationale of populism and the concerns raised by it captures some real depravities of the democratic political system, it fails to rectify the representation crisis of democracy, creating the democracy-populism paradox.<sup>51</sup> Scholars Marie-Isabel Theuwis and Rosa Kindt captures

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<sup>45</sup> Diego Fossati, “Populist Polarisation Might Benefit Democracy – as Southeast Asia Suggests,” *The Loop*, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/populist-polarisation-might-benefit-democracy-as-southeast-asia-suggests/>.

<sup>46</sup> Tomáš Dvořák, “Populism, Anti-establishment Politics, and Dimensions of Political Competition: Analysis of Populist Attitudes in the Czech Republic,” *University of California Press* 55, no. 3 (September 2022).

<sup>47</sup> “The Others or the Outsiders,” *European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)*, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/the-others-or-the-outsiders/>

<sup>48</sup> Kirk A. Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “The Ideational Approach to Populism,” *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017): 513–28.

<sup>49</sup> Francisco Panizza, ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> Jakob Schwörer, *The Growth of Populism in the Political Mainstream: The Contagion Effect of Populist Messages on Mainstream Parties’ Communication* (Springer, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Bruce Kapferer and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, *Democracy’s Paradox: Populism and Its Contemporary Crisis* (New York: Berghahn Publisher, 2019).

that paradox as they note “Populism has an ambivalent relationship with democracy. It affirms the core democratic principle of power to the people, but is rigorous to the point of zealotry in its pursuit of this principle. This leads, for instance, to the rejection of mediated representation.”<sup>52</sup> (corrupt elite/outsider).

However, populism as seemingly cathartic political project to refurbish the ideals of truly representative and participatory democracy is itself perceived by its critics as a ‘potential usurper’ of the vestiges of liberal democratic institutions and processes.<sup>53</sup> This is the point of contradiction between what the populist political discourse claims to be and actually delivers in the cause of popular sovereignty within the framework of constitutional democracy.<sup>54</sup> However, the scholars have cautioned that populist politics shouldn’t be misconstrued as one of the pathological pitfalls of democracy or a departure from democracy.<sup>55</sup> Rather, populist style of politics is inextricably linked with the very functioning of democracy and is deeply shaping democracy. Hence, contrary to the overwhelming apprehension that eclipses the conceptual foundations of populism, it is not only a pathology in democratic politics that can be assuaged through institutional reforms. Rather, it is an epiphenomenon of how democratic politics is practised and hence the challenges posed by populism needs to be confronted with and navigated through within democratic political landscape.<sup>56</sup> Also, populist political appeal, though thrives best in the context of crisis politics, has the capacity to adopt the banality of everyday politics by innovating newer multifarious idioms of ‘emancipatory’ politics.<sup>57</sup> At the heart of the concept of populism, lies the need for bringing politics i.e. the state close to the people as much as possible. In this sense, it encapsulates the essence of classical definition of democracy, which is ‘rule by people’. However, the populist pursuit for ensuring closest

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<sup>52</sup> Marie-Isabel Theuwis and Rosa Kindt, “Populist Attitudes as Thermometers of Democratic Quality,” *The Loop*, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/populist-attitudes-as-thermometers-of-democratic-quality/>

<sup>53</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> Jasmin Sarah König and Tilko Swalve, “Populists in Power, Constitutional Change, and Democratic Backsliding,” *The Loop*, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/populists-in-power-constitutional-change-and-democratic-backsliding/>

<sup>55</sup> Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, “Populism versus Democracy,” *Political Studies* 55 (2007): 405–24.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin Arditi, “Populism, or, Politics at the Edges of Democracy,” *Contemporary Politics* 9, no. 1 (2003): 17–31.

<sup>57</sup> Basak Gemici, “Authoritarian Populism and Social Discomfort in Everyday Life,” *Social Problems*, July 27, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spad036>.

possible way of ascertaining direct rule of the people have serious detrimental effect on the other crucial element of democracy, which is institutional safeguard based on ‘rule of law.’

The institutions of democracy, comprising the parliament, judiciary and other crucial oversight organs along with political parties are perceived by the populist discourse as either ‘corrupt’, and/or ‘pro-elite’ that ostensibly obstructs the actualisation of the ‘general will’ of the majority.

Such an anti-institutional character of the populist appeals of all kinds, makes it a challenging proposition for institutions of democracy. Also, the project of eroding the ‘obstructionist’ institutional bulwarks is predicated upon bestowing the ‘will of the people’ (general will) in a personality cult that embodies the ‘people’ in opposition to corrupt establishment/elite. This appeal of the populist politics paves the way for centralisation of authority in a personality cult that creates conducive conditions for authoritarian leadership facilitated by electoral majoritarianism threatening pluralism bereft of institutional safeguards.<sup>58</sup> So, it is not the vision of populism but the practise of it that seems to majorly trample upon the institutional sanctity of rule-of-law based democratic politics. The main critic of populism is that it is seen as a political strategy of claim making.<sup>59</sup> They argue that while populist leader uses a populist discourse of strengthening representative democracy, they do not really believe in it.<sup>60</sup> Scholars like Mammone literally describe populism as a mere strategy to gain power.<sup>61</sup> In essence, populists are accused of saying whatever the people want to hear in an opportunistic attempt to gain popularity.<sup>62</sup> Such a strategy comprises “the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power.” It constitutes a coherent set of approaches and mechanisms for structuring relations of political participation, support building, and governmental authority only to get

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<sup>58</sup> Christian F. Rostbøll, “How Populism Fails to Respect the People,” *The Loop*, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/how-populism-fails-to-respect-the-people-2/>.

<sup>59</sup> Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse, “Neue Formen des Politischen Extremismus?” in *Jahrbuch Extremismus und Demokratie*, vol. 10, ed. Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1998), 15–32.

<sup>60</sup> Andrea Mammone, “The Eternal Return? Faux Populism and Contemporarization of Neo-Fascism Across Britain, France, and Italy,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17, no. 2 (2009): 171–92.

across Britain, France and Italy,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 17(2): 171–92

<sup>61</sup> Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse, “Neue Formen des Politischen Extremismus?” in *Jahrbuch Extremismus und Demokratie*, vol. 10, ed. Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1998), 15–32.

<sup>62</sup> Andrea Mammone, “The Eternal Return? Faux Populism and Contemporarization of Neo-Fascism across Britain, France and Italy,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Volume 17, 2009 - Issue 2: The Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe: History, Interpretation and Performance

majority support and capture power led by a charismatic leader who would loom large to trample upon the institutional bulwarks of constitutional democracy.<sup>63</sup>

### Political Communication of the populists

Theorists of populism are divided on the implications of populist politics. The Marxist and other socialist strands propounded populism as an emancipatory popular project that is ‘radically democratizing, equalizing, inclusive, anti-elitist and rooted, plebeian movement.’<sup>64</sup> Such a school of thought projects populism as a people’s movement borne out of the disillusionment with the corrupt, nepotistic and inefficient ‘integral’ state working in the interest of and in cahoots with the neoliberal capitalist forces and the bourgeoisie elite.<sup>65</sup> Political theorist Ernesto Laclau has defined such broad-based alliance of the people with unfulfilled aspirations cutting across any specific social category as a ‘chain of equivalence’ in which the plethora of different demands gets accommodated to strengthen the populist movement against the political establishment.<sup>66</sup> Laclau and Mouffe propounded his theory of “left-wing populism as the appropriate successor for the politics of the older socialist, social democratic, and labor parties.”<sup>67</sup> Hugo Chavez in Venezuela as a recent case in Latin America, Has shown that such movements against neoliberal capital is often led by a charismatic leader who would work as an ‘empty signifier’ as the ‘embodied sovereign’ representing disparate demands and aspirations of different groups of people.<sup>68</sup> 2008 financial crisis also saw the rise of Syriza in Greece, and to a lesser extent Podemos in Spain whose populist appeal was identified with the radical left within Europe which is otherwise dominated by right-wing or cultural populism.<sup>69</sup> The leader who claims to represent the non-elite true/pure ‘people’ eschews the niceties of aristocratic elite politics and leader’s political style becomes

<sup>63</sup>Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: ‘Populism’ in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.

<sup>64</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).

<sup>65</sup> Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994).

<sup>66</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso Books, 2005)

<sup>67</sup> John B. Judis, “Rethinking Populism,” *Dissent*, Fall 2016, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/rethinking-populism-laclau-mouffe-podemos/>

<sup>68</sup> Kirk Andrew Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, “Left-Wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 119–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266>.

transgressive of the “proper” way of doing politics, of “ideal” public behavior, or of what can or “should” be publicly said as he adopts the idiom of the “plebian.” It also involves tactical dynamism in accommodating changing demands and constituents by deploying numerous ‘floating signifiers.’<sup>70</sup> However, for the left-wing populist discourse, reinforcing the true representative nature of the political will and working programmatically for the social-egalitarian policies is theoretically believed to be the objective of such populist movements. The egalitarian repertoire that claims to reflect the interests of the weaker sections of the majority people endemic to the left-wing populist appeal gives it a veneer of emancipatory politics.<sup>71</sup> However, history of recent wave of left-wing populism in the Latin American countries like Venezuela, Mexico, and Bolivia, also called radical populism, have witnessed the rise of authoritarian populist leaders like Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa with the rhetoric of anti-neoliberalism.<sup>72</sup> Hence, centralisation of power in the hands of strong charismatic leaders create conditions which are inimical to the consolidation of democratic institutions in these countries challenging the emancipatory promise of left-wing populism.<sup>73</sup>

One key element of the populist project is defining the ‘the real virtuous people’ in opposition to an antagonistic ‘other.’ In the narrative of left-wing populism, ‘the real people’ often constituted by the lower and middle class, working professionals, marginalised groups, youth and women amongst others is defined vertically in opposition to the political establishment and institutions ostensibly working in the interests of the corrupt and rich.<sup>74</sup> Though the left-wing populist moment, to some extent, builds a mass-based movement on the aspirational and material needs of the common people strengthening representative function of democracy, it has shown the propensity of drifting into authoritarian or totalitarian regimes by subverting institutions of democracy and rule of law as seen in Latin American countries.<sup>75</sup> Hence, the

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<sup>70</sup> Felipe Rafael Linden, “How ‘Empty’ Is the Signifier ‘The People’? Impasses of the Poststructuralist Approach in Ernesto Laclau’s Political Ontology,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2023.2230449>.

<sup>71</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Populists Are on the Rise but This Can Be a Moment for Progressives Too,” *The Guardian*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/22/populism-concept-defines-our-age>

<sup>72</sup> Steven Levitsky and Kenneth Roberts, eds., *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

<sup>73</sup> Raúl Madrid, *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).

<sup>75</sup> Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia Arnson, “Introduction: The Evolution of Latin American Populism and the Debates Over Its Meanings,” in *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia Arnson (Baltimore and Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013), 1–37.

critiques questioning the emancipatory potential of left-wing populism have pointed out that populism as a political project is merely an instrument for crafting a compelling political appeal needed for winning the tactical electoral battle of capturing political power.<sup>76</sup> So, it is bereft of the intention and potential to envisage projects of positive cultural pedagogy or social transformation.<sup>77</sup>

On the other side, the populist political appeal that has swept the foundations of constitutional democracy across the west as well as in the developing countries in the last two decades, is defined as right-wing populism, which is often exclusionary and nativist in nature.<sup>78</sup> The right-wing populists have consolidated their electoral clout across Europe in an unprecedented manner.<sup>79</sup> It is highly critiqued as an anathema for liberal democracy for harbouring majoritarian and xenophobic tendencies in electoral democracies.<sup>80</sup> This is primarily because the populist creation of the ‘authentic’ people is done on ethno-cultural lines where the ethnic minorities are projected as the ‘despicable other’ who are ostensibly impinging upon the rights and interests of the ‘authentic people’ that constitutes the majority population in the country.<sup>81</sup> Such a homogenous project of ‘people making’ tramples upon the pluralistic social fabric of many multi-cultural democracies across the globe is fomenting social discord and political polarisation.<sup>82</sup>

The ethno-religious and racial horizontal definition of the ‘threatening other’ includes minority religious, ethnic and racial community groups and immigrant population. At the vertical level, the right-wing politics directs the mass resentment against the political elite and the liberal media and civil society for allegedly safeguarding the interests of the minorities, migrants and vested interests at the cost of the native majority that in its construction, constitutes the

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<sup>76</sup> Christopher Sabatini, “The economics of populism is failing in Latin America”, *Chatham House*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/economics-populism-failing-latin-america>

<sup>77</sup> Cas Mudde, “How Populism Became the Concept That Defines Our Age,” *The Guardian*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/10/populists-rise-progressives-radical-right>

<sup>78</sup> “Right-wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse,”

<sup>79</sup> Laura Silver, “Populists in Europe – Especially Those on the Right – Have Increased Their Vote Shares in Recent Elections,” *Pew Research Centre*, October 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>81</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>82</sup> Paul Sandrin, “The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Europe: A Psychoanalytical Contribution,” in *Financial Crisis Management and Democracy*, 2020.

authentic people and deserves superior socio-political position vis-à-vis the ‘other’.<sup>83</sup> For instance, Trump’s populism in US can be a case in point here. “Donald Trump, adored by supporters as a disruptive teller of unvarnished truths, watched his poll numbers rise with each outrageous statement—be it about Latin American immigrants, Muslims, women, or his political opponents. Yet again, this performance of the low was also loaded with its own visceral sense of abjection.”<sup>84</sup> Similar to left-wing populist movement, right-wing populists also have embodied sovereign in a charismatic leader who personifies the aspirations of the ‘authentic people’.<sup>85</sup> As the populist politics aims to dismantle the corrupt institutions of power that has historically deprived the ‘real people’ of its rights, populist leadership<sup>86</sup> of all hues are seen to subvert democratic institutions in order to directly interact and provide governance to the people.<sup>87</sup>

### **Why people respond to populism?**

The phenomenon of populist political discourse thrives on an emotive appeal from the leadership to the masses. In order to understand the success of political appeal of the populist leaders, it is crucial to study why and how populist narratives gain traction among the masses. The populist appeal not only thrives on the effective construction of the ‘people’ as a mass mobilisation strategy, it also requires popular support of sizeable number of people for its political surviving and for capturing governmental power in a democracy. Hence it is important to delve into the popular pull toward populist leadership styles that would reveal the demand side of populism. The overwhelming sentiment that shapes the mass appeal in populism is fathomless public resentment that creates the figure of an angry ‘citizen-subject.’<sup>88</sup> The cause of such resentment has been attributed to the crisis of democracy propounded widely by the

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<sup>83</sup> Iza Ding and Marek Hlavac, “Right Choice: Restorative Nationalism and Right-Wing Populism in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Chinese Political Science Review* 2 (2017): 427–44.

<sup>84</sup> J Miles Johnson, “Trump Blasts O’Malley: ‘Disgusting, Little, Weak, Pathetic Baby,’” *Mother Jones Magazine*, August 21, 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Steven M. Van Hauwaert and Stijn van Kessel, “Beyond Protest and Discontent: A Cross-National Analysis of the Effect of Populist Attitudes and Issue Positions on Populist Party Support,” *European Journal of Political Research* 57, no. 1 (2018): 68–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12216>.

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen, “Populist Governments and Their Logic,” in *Populism and Civil Society*, ed. Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 107–152, <https://academic.oup.com/book/41832/chapter-abstract/354609257?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

<sup>87</sup> Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, “Populism versus Democracy,” *Political Studies* 55 (2007): 405–24.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage, 1996).

‘mass society’ thesis.<sup>89 90</sup> The promise of a liberal constitutional democratic system has been of creating a politically empowered citizenry flourishing under a rights-based welfare state that runs on the basis of rule of law and democratic accountability. However, the conduct of the political dispensations of the major electoral democracies has disenchanted the populace due to the limitations of the democratic state and its institution’s inefficiency, corruption, nepotism and nexus with the owners of the global capital that resulted in aggravation of economic inequality, cultural insecurities and social discord.<sup>91</sup> Within populist narratives, often immigrants, minorities and refugees are projected as economic and cultural threat to the majority native population creating the necessary other to galvanise the support of the majority people needed for electoral mobilisation.<sup>92</sup>

Moreover, the growth of the consumerist society in a globalised as well as digitised world has catapulted human aspirations of socio-economic mobility. However, the increasing economic inequality, inflation, employment crisis squandering the aspirations of a ‘good/better life’ for the toiling lower and middle class constituting the majority in many democracies across the world has triggered an indomitable public resentment against the present form of the democratic political order.<sup>93</sup> The forces of global capital and vagaries of modernity has also destroyed social networks that served as coherent collective conscience and has led to the creation of isolated individualistic lives, triggering various hues of human insecurity.<sup>94</sup> The populist political project through its charismatic leader rakes up this public resentment against the political establishment and conventional modalities of institutional democratic politics and tactically mobilises the majority community either on socio-cultural identarian lines or with the promise of a better dignified life with material welfare goods also called mass clientalism.<sup>95</sup> Mostly, populist appeals are based on an inextricable combination of promises regarding socio-cultural representation, conservation and revival as well as material development. In both ways,

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<sup>89</sup> William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1959)

<sup>90</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1997)

<sup>91</sup> Ajay Gudavarthy, *India After Modi: Populism and the Right* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2023).

<sup>92</sup> Dragana Svraka, “How Populism and Nativism Matter for Minorities,” *The Loop*, December 2023, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/how-populism-and-nativism-matter-for-minorities/>.

<sup>93</sup> Philippe Van Parijs, “Insecurity and the Rise of Populism,” *Friends of Europe*, April 21, 2023, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/insecurity-and-the-rise-of-populism/>.

<sup>94</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (Ruth Benedict Book Series) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>95</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, “Populism and Constitutionalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

the populist political appeal projects itself as being outside the embedded system of compromised political elite through the ‘politics of anti-politics’ and mobilise the people to support the populist leadership for overthrowing the corrupt elite and ensuring true representation of the interests of the ‘authentic people’. Though the appeal of populism is based on a promise of removing the veneer of the entrenched domination of the self-serving elite over the political institutions, it has been accused to be as a political manipulation tactic of making empty promise for eliciting electoral support of the masses. Though deceit and duplicity are not unique to the populist political project and is a commonly practised human fallacy often witnessed in all forms of political life, populist resort to tactical manipulation of the masses by fanning emotive grievances has deep impact over the foundation of democratic system in significant ways.<sup>96</sup>

First, populism’s creation of the ‘people’ and the ‘other’ paves the way for deep polarisation and social disharmony leading to majoritarianism, bigotry and intolerance in multi-cultural and diverse societies. Second, populist political appeal’s tendency of creating a monolithic definition of people whom it considers as its target social base for getting political support undermines the existence of plurality of views, dissenting constituencies and political actors in the opposition within multi-party democracies. The populist leadership asserts itself as a sole embodiment of the interest of ‘the people’ and not only demonises the political opponents as ‘enemy’ of the nation and but seeks to delegitimise the citizens outside its support base as the ‘threatening’ other.<sup>97</sup> Third, the populist political appeal accords foremost importance to the popular elections as the ultimate marker of legitimacy in a democracy and systematically suppresses the institutions, procedures and rule of law that constitutes the bulwark of constitutional democracy. Fourth, it creates a perennial condition of a mythical moral war against the ‘other’ amidst a crisis, real or imagined, for the salvation of ‘the people’ and the nation led by the charismatic leader.<sup>98</sup> Such polarised political environment driven by sycophancy towards the embodied sovereign, the populist leader, enervates democratic space

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<sup>96</sup>Philipp Wunderlich, Christoph Nguyen, and Christian von Scheve, “Angry Populists or Concerned Citizens? How Linguistic Emotion Ascriptions Shape Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioural Responses to Political Outgroups,” *Cognition and Emotion* 37, no. 1 (2023).

<sup>97</sup>Jacek Lewkowicz et al., “The Longer the Worse? The Case of Populism, Anti-Pluralism, and Constitutional Compliance,” *Democratisation* 31, no. 1 (2024), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2023.2258341>.

<sup>98</sup>Paul J. Maher, Adrian Lüders, Elif Erisen, Matthijs Rooduijn, and Eva M. Jonas, “The Many Guises of Populism and Crisis: Introduction to the Special Issue on Populism and Global Crises,” *Political Psychology*, June 8, 2022, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12840>

for institutional restraint as well as open debate, expression and consultation for negotiation of differences. Monolithic dramatic emotive communication from the leader to its people can create a situation of politically ignorant ‘audience democracy’ in populist political regimes created in a ‘mass society.’<sup>99</sup> Fifth, the distribution of material goods by the leader to its people seen as an important element of populism often triggers fiscally imprudent governmental policies and creates a situation of mass clientelism where people get extremely dependent on the populist regimes squandering human enterprise and agency.<sup>100</sup>

### **Key variables of populist communication**

Broadly speaking, populism thrives in a socio-economic and political condition of ‘crisis’ that makes it conducive for a personalistic leader to make popular appeal for occupying governmental power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized ‘disgruntled’ followers. The political appeal of populism is often regarded to be a political strategy or approach based on a ‘thin-centred ideology’ or ‘empty signifier’ without any definite concrete doctrinaire.<sup>101</sup> But the strategy is not entirely empty as it entails certain specific ideas and socio-cultural idioms with a definite political style. So, the populist political style can be structured in a particular way to ensure the representation of whatever political content it seeks to articulate. The political communication between the populist political leader and the people whom the leader considers to be its core electoral constituency and seeks to represent them is the key element that shapes the discourse of populist politics.

Drawing from the ‘populism as a political strategy’ thesis, the populist leadership communication has three integral parts to it. First, the leader has to create a ‘people’ as a moral and virtuous entity based on some specific socio-cultural 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, the leader has to possess the charisma to establish his emotive relationship with ‘the people’ by instinctively relating to

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<sup>99</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Populist Politics, Communications Media and Large-Scale Societal Integration,” *Sociological Theory* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 1988): 219–41.

<sup>100</sup> Nicos Mouzelis, “On the Concept of Populism: Populist and Clientelist Modes of Incorporation in Semiperipheral Polities,” *Politics and Society* 14, no. 3 (1985).

<sup>101</sup> Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, “Populism and Democracy,” *Political Studies* 55, no. 2 (2007): 405–24..

their interests and claim to be their sole representative. Third, as the leader is the sole custodian of the people's interest, he or she directly communicates with the people, distributes material welfare to them and delivers governance overshadowing the rule-based institutions of democracy.

### **Indian democracy and populist leadership**

India, with its multi-party electoral democracy and a federal polity, have witnessed many kinds of populist political appeals. Political leadership in India has been characterized by direct, personalized appeals to “the people” by leaders who deploy particular socio-economic and cultural registers to secure and maintain political power by circumventing political intermediaries and organisational structures and by subverting institutions of democracy.<sup>102</sup> Hence, in Indian context, populism can be traced as a distinctive form of political strategy and politics conducted within an ideational and socio-cultural register grounded in a “plebeian grammar”.<sup>103</sup>

The culture of bhakti cult and mass adulation of charismatic leaders has historically been the modus operandi of Indian politics, making it conducive for crafting effective populist appeal.<sup>104</sup> Early traces of populist leadership have been first attributed to the politics of Mahatma Gandhi who epitomised the political imagery of ‘the Indian people’ in mobilising the nationalist freedom movement against the colonial rulers as the ‘other’.<sup>105</sup> Gandhi’s imagery of ‘saintly politics’ based on self-abnegation and asceticism consolidated his charisma amongst the Indian masses through which he effectively built a broad-based social coalition transcending internal faultiness for initiating the national movement against British rule. However, such populist political appeal has been touted as a positive political project of building a participatory mass movement of political awakening of the people for their own right to self-determination and

<sup>102</sup>Minahil Khalid, “Populism in India: Navigating the Indian Political Landscape,” *Paradigm Shift*, July 2, 2024, <https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/populism-in-india/>

<sup>103</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot & Louise Tillin, “Populism in India,” *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Christobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>104</sup> Atul Sehgal, “We Don’t Need Another Hero,” *The New Indian Express*, May 19, 2024, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/lifestyle/spirituality/2024/May/18/we-dont-need-another-hero>.

Vijayalakshmi Sridhar, “Hero-Worship Scales New Heights in India,” *Al Jazeera*, March 21, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/3/21/hero-worship-scales-new-heights-in-india>.

<sup>105</sup>Narendra Subramaniam, “Populism in India,” *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2007): 81–91.

political freedom. However, scholars have been more divided on the implications of populist politics by leaders in subsequent years of Indian independence.<sup>106</sup>

Jaffrelot and Tillin has categorised populist political appeal in India in three ways- in socio-economic terms, ethno-religious and regional identity, each of which was carefully crafted by charismatic personality cult of the prominent leaders. They argue that populism has impacted Indian democracy in three distinctive phases in which the populist construction of the people has been differently done. First, Congress leader and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and later Charan Singh, peasant leader who also served a short stint as PM, scripted the populist grammar in Indian politics by constructing the idea of people based on socio-economic categories.<sup>107</sup> Indira Gandhi, after the split of her party defined ‘the people’ encapsulating the “poor and marginalized sections” against the vested interest of landed gentry, capitalist and the conservatives whose interest she claimed was safeguarded by her political opponents.<sup>108</sup> For Charan Singh, the people constituted the “peasants and farmers”<sup>109</sup> of India representing the Indian villages and the ‘other’ comprised of the “merchants, money-lenders, political elite and urban dwellers”.<sup>110</sup>

The populist tendency found a communal Hindutva flavor in the political appeal of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, Narendra Modi in his earlier stint as Chief Minister in Gujarat. Since 2014 presently as the Prime Minister of India, Modi’s populist appeal has consolidated and broadened in its scope and reach.<sup>111</sup> Hindutva populism led by Modi<sup>112</sup> created an electorally rewarding ethnic majoritarian imagination of Hindus as the ‘authentic people’ and attempts are made to marginalise the minority Muslim community as the ‘other’ who are allegedly safeguarded in the name of ‘pseudo-secularism’ by the hitherto ruling elite led by the Congress

<sup>106</sup>Narendra Subramaniam, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>107</sup> Gyan Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy’s Turning Point* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2018)

<sup>108</sup> Suhit K. Sen, “The Paradox of Populism: The Indira Gandhi Years, 1966-1977,” *The Hindu*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/the-paradox-of-populism-the-indira-gandhi-years-1966-1977-review-looking-back-at-emergency-and-a-turning-point-in-the-congress/article31922241.ece>.

<sup>109</sup> Gyanendra Rawat, ed., *Chaudhuri Charan Singh: Sukti aur Vichar* (in Hindi) (New Delhi: Kisan Trust, 1985)

<sup>110</sup> Charan Singh, *India’s Poverty and Its Solution*, 2nd rev. ed. (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964).

Charan Singh, *Land Reforms in U.P. and the Kulaks* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt., 1986).

<sup>111</sup> Diwaker, “Hero-Worship Is a Sure Road to Eventual Dictatorship: Ambedkar’s Warning for the Indian Media,” *The Caravan*, June 2, 2019, <https://caravanmagazine.in/media/hero-worship-is-a-sure-road-to-eventual-dictatorship-ambedkars-warning>.

<sup>112</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man, the Times* (Chennai: Tranquebar Press, 2013)

party and liberal English-speaking media and civil society at the cost of the Hindu majority.<sup>113</sup> Such majoritarian populism after capturing governmental power has shown the propensity of authoritarian tendencies led by strong leader, Modi reminiscent of Indira's political style.<sup>114</sup>

Third, the charismatic regional leaders of Tamil Nadu like Karunanidhi, MGR<sup>115</sup> and Jayalathitha<sup>116</sup> and T Rama Rao<sup>117</sup> in Andhra Pradesh made their populist appeal on the basis of their ethnic, linguistic and regional pride mainly to the middle and intermediate castes for massive mass mobilisation against the Brahmanical culture, Hindi imposition and Central government's domination. Such regional and subnational populist regimes often derives its popular legitimacy based on mass clientelism through welfare populism of distribution of material goods in the name of their supreme leaders directly to the people.<sup>118</sup> North Indian caste-based parties like RJD, SP and BSP are also termed as populists for invoking 'the people' representing certain dominant sections of the lower and intermediate castes in their imagination of the people against the upper caste domination.<sup>119</sup> The newer regional parties like TMC in Bengal led by its charismatic leader, Mamata Banerjee<sup>120</sup> and AAP led by Arvind Kejriwal<sup>121</sup> also offer a different variant of populist style of leadership and governance pattern. A section of the scholars has touted the rise of regional populists who sought to represent the hitherto marginalised and oppressed communities like lower and intermediate castes and their waging a protest against the hegemonic cultural and political dominance by the national parties as an indicator of deepening democracy and a push towards social justice and welfare politics.

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<sup>113</sup> Ajay Gudavarthy, *India After Modi: Populism and the Right* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2023).

<sup>114</sup> Priya Chacko, *The Right Turn in India: Authoritarianism, Populism and Neoliberalism* (2018).

<sup>115</sup> M. S. S. Pandian, *The Image Trap: MG Ramachandran in Film and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992).

<sup>116</sup> Carole Spary, "Female Political Leadership in India," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 45, no. 3 (2007): 253–77.

<sup>117</sup> Atul Kohli, "The NTR Phenomenon in Andhra Pradesh: Political Change in a South Indian State," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 10 (1988): 991–1017.

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Wyatt, "Populism and Politics in Contemporary Tamil Nadu," *Contemporary South Asia* 21, no. 4 (2013): 365–81.

<sup>119</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot and Louis Tillin, "Populism in India," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Christobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>120</sup> Proma Ray Chaudhury, "The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India," *Politics and Gender* (Cambridge University Press): 1–36

<sup>121</sup> Hilal Ahmed, "Arvind Kejriwal and Hero Worship in Indian Politics," *The Indian Express*, September 19, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/arvind-kejriwal-and-hero-worship-in-indian-politics-9575072/>

However, the tendency of the regional populists to selectively represent and empower few dominant backward communities who constitutes their core support base, excessive reliance on the charismatic leader transcending party organisation and institutions and indulging in fiscally imprudent mass clientelism by distributing material resources more than initiating long-term developmental plans, questions the extent of positive impact such politics has on India's democratic fabric.<sup>122</sup>

### **Political culture as a driver of populism**

There is also a plethora of literature that delves into the political culture in India from where possible explanations for the prevalence of populist politics can be drawn.<sup>123</sup> To start with, Kenny's work highlights that when the integrated chain of patronage network of the political parties that survives on the dependence of local units on the central party leadership for political and economic resources break down, the local units that Kenny calls political "brokers" becomes autonomous. In such circumstances, the central leadership of the party, stripped of its organizational support from the regional units, resort to the populist style of mass mobilization in order to establish a direct mass connect by subverting the intermediate networks of patronage for political survival, explaining Indira's populist move after the party split in 1969.<sup>124</sup> The prevalence of popular dynastic leaders who enjoys massive support through their family name and charisma is another feature of populist politics in India.<sup>125</sup>

Rajni Kothari observed that in India the unbridled global capitalist domination armed with its technological prowess and insidious designs of increasing arms trade and maddening weaponisation programme has derailed the democratic state from its erstwhile welfarist predilections. The capitalist economy and free market enterprises ushered in prosperity for a microscopic minority that constitutes the upper echelons of Indian elite. While the majority of the poor, marginalized and vulnerable whom Kothari considers the "social order of India" is being pushed to the periphery.<sup>126</sup> Under such a state of tremendous incapacity and apathy of

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<sup>122</sup> Niraja Gopal Jayal, ed., *Re-forming India: The Nation Today* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2019).

<sup>123</sup> Ashis Nandy, "The Culture of Indian Politics: A Stock Taking," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 1 (November 1970): 57–79.

<sup>124</sup> Paul D. Kenny, *Populism and Patronage: Why Populists Win Elections in India, Asia and Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>125</sup> Kanchan Chandra, *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>126</sup> Rajni Kothari, *Rethinking Democracy* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2005).

the Indian state, the section of populace that demands state action are subjected to brutal repression and atrocity. The state injects the populist resorts of “political double speak” by making empty rhetorical promises of prosperity and also attempts to divert the attention of the masses from the ensuing economic inequality by fomenting caste and clan wars among the people. Beteille observes that India’s societal configuration has obstructed the consolidation of India as a modern nation of citizens. Indian society that still languishes in the vagaries of caste, community and kinship failed to adopt the democratic way of life that Beteille terms as “habit of hearts”.<sup>127</sup> The sheer lack of trust among the elites and in the democratic institutions and the complete absence of constitutional morality in Indian democracy have reduced it to a mere electoral democracy that attaches excessive primacy to rule of numbers and shows scant regard for rule of law. So, the drift from constitutional democracy to populist democracy in India thrives on the politics of social identity and communitarian sentiments.

### **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 literature also attempts to rigidly categorise the populist discourse in India and beyond, within the binaries of right and left ideological spectrums. Jaffrelot’s “third” categorization of welfare populism in two South Indian states and Chatterjee’s ‘governmental populism’ and Kerry’s ‘inclusive populism’ are some of the few evolving conceptualisations of populism in India 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 investigate 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

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<sup>127</sup> Andre Beteille, *Democracy and Its Institutions* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

leaders who occupy power at the state-level and is crucially shaping Indian politics, needs serious investigation. 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.<sup>128</sup>

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 period? 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 materialise 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?

- 1) What is the nature of the political communication of the populist leaders in India?

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<sup>128</sup> Catarina Kinnvall, "Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the Masculinization of Indian Politics," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 283–302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1588851>

- 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."

Trappes-Lomax identifies several key attributes of discourse analysis amongst which two key elements are most relevant for our study. First, the linguistic, cognitive and social processes

whereby meanings are expressed and intentions interpreted in human interaction.” Second, is the “historically and culturally embedded sets of conventions which constitute and regulate such processes.” Discourse analysis is more formally defined as “the study of language viewed communicatively and/or of communication viewed linguistically with the text as its concrete object of investigation.”<sup>129</sup> 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, is 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.”<sup>130</sup> 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.<sup>131</sup> 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.<sup>132</sup> 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

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<sup>129</sup> H. Trappes-Loxam, “Discourse Analysis,” in *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, eds A Davies, and C. Elder. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004: 132-64.)

<sup>130</sup> Partha Pratim Basu, “Discourse Analysis,” In *Revisiting Qualitative Methods in Social Science Research*. (Eds) Bonita Aleaz and Partha Pratim Basu. (Orient BlackSwan: 2019)

<sup>131</sup> Descriptive statistics summarize and organize characteristics of a data set. A data set is a collection of responses or observations from a sample or entire population.

<sup>132</sup> “Descriptive Statistics,” *Conjointly*, accessed on January 20, 2025, <https://conjointly.com/kb/descriptive-statistics/>

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) 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.<sup>133</sup>

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 concerned political parties (TMC, BJP, AAP) relevant for this study. 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.

### **Framework of the Study**

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

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<sup>133</sup> For the fieldwork to conduct the public survey, FGDs and interviews, the researcher visited Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Malda, Medinipur, Kolkata, Thakur Nagar in West Bengal. For the fieldwork in Delhi, the researcher visited East Delhi and New Delhi. For the fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh, Varanasi and Prayagraj (formerly called Allahabad) was selected.

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 in two 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. The thesis is divided into seven chapters. 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. 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. Under chapter 3, the study delved into the nature of the political communication of the three leaders. It includes the election speeches, interviews and legislative deliberations of these leaders. Chapter 4 provides a case study that would analyse 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 a moment of ‘crisis politics.’ Chapter 5 looks at the public perception of these three political leaders to

understand how people look at these leaders and why do they get drawn towards their populist political appeal.

Chapter 6 makes an assessment of public perception on the populist ideas of society, politics and welfare and explains how such perception shapes public support for populist leadership 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.

**CHAPTER 2: PROFILING OF THE  
'POPULIST SELF': MODI, MAMATA  
AND KEJRIWAL**

Political leadership remains the central focus for understanding the populist appeal in India in this study. A leader's political personality and public appeal is constitutive of three aspects. First, it is the background and socio-political profile of the leader that is crucial. That explains the making of the personality and evolution of the person as a leader. This aspect is largely embedded in the factual personal profile and life history of the leader. Second, once the leader enters public life, how the leader himself or herself cultivates his or her imagery in politics, is also extremely crucial. That makes the self- projection or self-fashioning of the leadership personality. Third, comes the most crucial aspect of how the leader is looked at in the public sphere. In other words, how the various stakeholders that include common voters, experts, media and political workers and other leaders perceive the personality of the leader. It is this public perception of the leader that ultimately impacts and shapes the leader's political profile and creates the public appeal and popular legitimacy of the leader. We will deal with the first aspect of understanding the dynamics of leadership in this chapter.

As we are studying the populist appeal of the three leaders, introducing the political profiles of the leaders in this study would be in order. This would also enable us to identify the attributes endemic to the leader's public profile and imagery that strengthened their populist appeal. Most importantly, a brief overview of the public profile, personality and political journey of the leader would help us to identify the characteristics of the leaders which makes them ideal to be studied from the lens of populist leadership framework. Political personality profiling has emerged a very helpful tool "to understand the key life experiences that shaped the individual developmentally, and how they contributed to his becoming a leader, and to what kind of leader he became. It is essential accurately to locate the subject in his historical/political/cultural context in order to understand the manner in which the history, politics, and culture shape and constrain the leader."<sup>1</sup> For the political profile of the three leaders- Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal, their memoirs and autobiographies, analytical articles and biographies on these leaders are referred to for penning down their brief profiles identifying the populist attributes and conjectures in their life, career and personality that gives us a compelling rationale to further study their populist appeal later in this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerrold M. Post, "Personality Profiling Analysis", In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, (Eds) R. A. W. Rhodes and Paul 't Hart, Oxford University Press, 2014

### **Modi: from teaseller to *vikas purush***

Studying the political personality of Narendra Modi has been extremely crucial to understand the discourse of populist leadership style in Indian politics in the last one decade.<sup>2</sup> The rise of the personality cult of Narendra Modi has been a momentous transformational moment for Indian politics at the national level in India. This can be attributed to two major factors. First, Modi emerged as a *de facto* leader of the BJP and created a personality cult for himself which many have touted as larger than the party itself.<sup>3</sup> This is unprecedented because BJP and the RSS as part of the Hindutva-driven Sangh organisational apparatus, have a highly regimented and cadre-based system, and is known to have always believed in giving most priority to the organisation and ideology over any specific individual.<sup>4</sup> Since 2014, election after election, political plank for the saffron party to galvanise the voters majorly revolved around the acceptability of the 'brand Modi.'<sup>5</sup> Second, in terms of popular appeal, Modi's reach has been far greater than any other BJP leader in the past.<sup>6</sup>

A party which was largely known as a political force confined to the 'Hindi belt' with its support-base mostly comprising of the Hindu upper castes, saw its expansion leaps and bounds under Modi.<sup>7</sup> The BJP increased its popularity amongst a cross-section of population that includes youth, women, Dalits and non-dominant OBCs creating a broad social base for Modi-led BJP giving it huge political headway in many states which were hitherto untouched by the BJP.<sup>8</sup> Under Modi, BJP for the first time in its entire period of existence, turned into a political behemoth replacing Congress as the principal pole of India's national politics. In the most

<sup>2</sup> "Narendra Modi: India's Vulnerable Strongman Populist Leader," *The Loop*, European Consortium for Political Research, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/narendra-modi-indias-vulnerable-strongman-populist-leader/>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Leader Who Is Bigger Than His Party," *The Hindu*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-leader-who-is-bigger-than-his-party/article62109737.ece>.

<sup>4</sup> "Narendra Modi, RSS, and BJP: Hindutva and the Making of India's Politics," *Himal Southasian*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.himalmag.com/politics/narendra-modi-rss-bjp-mohan-bhagat-india-hindutva>.

<sup>5</sup> "Marketing Modi: How PM's Brand Has Unfolded," *Deccan Herald*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/marketing-modi-how-pm-s-brand-has-unfolded-2848058>

<sup>6</sup> "How Narendra Modi Became the Indisputable Leader of BJP," *The Hindu Business Line*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/cover/how-narendra-modi-became-the-indisputable-leader-of-bjp/article29349795.ece>

<sup>7</sup> "Why India's South Confounds the Otherwise All-Conquering Narendra Modi," *The Economist*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/06/22/why-indias-south-confounds-the-otherwise-all-conquering-narendra-modi>

<sup>8</sup> Sanjay Kumar, "Verdict 2019: The Expanded Support Base of the Bharatiya Janata Party," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 1 (2020): 6–22.

inconducive circumstances and battling anti-incumbency, BJP has been able to not only capture newer political territories like Orisha, Assam and Tripura but could retain the old ones like Gujarat and MP.<sup>9</sup> Many of these difficult political contests has been won by the BJP largely riding on the “Modi wave.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, the “Modi phenomenon” became a subject of intense research interest. A broad strand of political science research on Modi called him a right-wing populist or a ‘strongman’ ‘national populist’ based on his masculine Hindutva political alignment juxtaposed with pan-India appeal based on hyper-national rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> Given his working style and centralised authority on the party and government, he has also been touted as an ‘authoritarian populist.’<sup>12</sup> Political Scientist Ajay Gudavarthy notes that “Modi became the glue cutting across the regions. He symbolized a new age religiosity, hyper-nationalism, and supremacism that came across in popular politics as resurgent Hindu identity and renewed Indic civilizational belonging.”<sup>13</sup> It is in this context that understanding why Modi’s life and political profile is a prerequisite for studying him within the populism framework.

- ***Humble background***

Modi’s own memoirs and subsequent correspondences have been replete with the reiterations that he belonged to a very poor family and have seen poverty firsthand throughout his life. Nilanjan Mukhopdhyay in his biography on Modi observed that how Modi narrated about his childhood struggles ““I had a lot of pain because I grew up in a village where there was no electricity and, in my childhood, we used to face a lot of hardships because of this.”” He talked about his lower caste as he belongs to the Other Backward Castes (OBC) category Ganchi caste. He also has narrated about his humble upbringing in a lower middleclass household in a small town called Vadnagar in Gujarat. What became the most known aspect of Modi’s humble childhood was that his father owned a tea stall at Vadnagar railway station and young Modi

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<sup>9</sup> Milan Vaishnav and Caroline Mallory, "The Resilience of India’s Fourth Party System," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 26, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/09/india-election-bjp-party-politics?lang=en>

<sup>10</sup> Mridula Chari, "What Is a Modi Wave? Political Scientists Are Looking for Answers," *Scroll.in*, May 28, 2019, <https://scroll.in/article/924872/what-is-a-modi-wave-political-scientists-are-looking-for-answers>

<sup>11</sup> "Modi and Right-Wing Populism in India," *Progressive Magazine*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://progressive.org/latest/modi-rightwing-populism-india-75-pal-081122/>.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, "Hindu Nationalist Statecraft and Modi's Authoritarian Populism," in *Routledge Handbook of Autocratization in South Asia*, ed. Natasha Ginwala and others (London: Routledge, 2021), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003042211-10/hindu-nationalist-statecraft-modi-authoritarian-populism-kenneth-bo-nielsen-alf-gunvald-nilsen>

<sup>13</sup> "What After Populism? Analyzing General Elections in India 2024," *Populism Studies*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.populismstudies.org/what-after-populism-analyzing-general-elections-in-india-2024/>

used to assist his father in selling tea. Throughout his political career, Modi has reiterated the *chaiwala* label to demonstrate his plebian image amongst the masses.<sup>14</sup> Modi's perspectives on his struggling childhood also have narratives of his mother using firewood for cooking causing her great inconvenience, lack of toilet at home and his mother had to washing dishes and cook food at other houses to support the family.<sup>15</sup> He repeatedly emphasised the lack of anything of pleasure, laziness and personal happiness in his own life which are intrinsic part of ordinary human happiness. 'I never gave anyone an opportunity to cook something special for me,' Modi said in a correspondence. He added that since he never had a family and never lived in a proper home after his childhood, his food habits were very basic because he 'does not have any taste buds left.' Modi explains the reason behind such frugality. "I have never wanted that at any point my body, my health should become a burden on my country. I would not want anyone to spend any time or expend their energies on looking after me — that is the reason why I pledged to stay healthy.' 'I sleep very less — just three and a half or four hours. When I was in Sangh I had developed this habit of being a very early riser and that habit has stayed on,' he said by way of explanation.'<sup>16</sup> Hence, frugality, toughness and discipline have been projected as major attributes of Modi's early life.

- ***Beyond the ordinary***

Modi's correspondence from childhood made a palpable reference of being different from others of his age. His uncle and his childhood friend testify the same. 'He liked to dress properly and took care of his clothes — did not allow them to get frayed and ruffled like other children. He spent a lot of time in grooming,' his uncle reminiscences in Nilanjan's book. His uncle further made a crucial point that though young Narendra lacked grasp over subjects in school, he was demonstrated leadership skills even as a child. His early sense of responsibility manifested in the fact that he was that rare exceptional boy in his cohort who used to help his father by working in his tea stall. Very early in his childhood, Modi was known to get drawn towards the growing movement for separate state of Gujarat in late 1950s. In this regard, Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay writes in Modi's biography. "Amongst others who would regularly

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<sup>14</sup>Michael Safi "Narendra Modi: From Impoverished Tea Seller to Master of Political Theatre," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/23/narendra-modi-from-impoveryished-tea-seller-to-master-of-political-theatre>

<sup>15</sup> "Narendra Modi: BBC Video Overview," *BBC News*, September 18, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-india-34376864>.

<sup>16</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man*, *The Times* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2013).

troop into Dave's office was the six-year-old Narendra. He was particularly interested in the badges proclaiming support for the state of Gujarat. He would collect them and then go around town and the railway station distributing them. Modi himself has vivid memories of his first foray into public life though he was hardly aware of what he was participating in and that this street would eventually become his "own" in less than two decades when he would formally become part of the political process." Modi also recalls this incident from his childhood boasting about his extraordinariness amongst his pals. "All children have a hobby of collecting badges — I at times used to be the leader of my gang of children. Rasikbhai was very elderly — almost my father's age. He used to like it that I used to come — did not waste the badges and instead distributed them... so he did not give the badges to any other child — he was very clear that if he wanted to distribute any badges then it was to me and he told this to others in the agitation." This hints at efforts of Modi's self-projection of himself as responsible and public spirited since his childhood. Nilanjan observes in his book based on his correspondence with Modi's childhood friends and teachers. "From a young age, Narendra also displayed certain rigidity and stubbornness to this character that became more pronounced when he shifted to the high school in Visnagar, the bigger town close by to study for the intermediate level. This was the quality that Dave had spotted while getting him to distribute the badges. It was the same quality that saw the young Narendra leading his schoolmates in celebrations when the separate state of Gujarat was carved out on 1 May 1960. (Modi's friend) Joshi recollected: 'We did not know what happened but Narendra bhai took the lead in shouting slogans and distributing sweets.' Clearly, even before he had turned ten, there were portends of what he would eventually become.'

Hence, standing out in the crowd, maturity of grasping the revolutionary mood of the moment during the creation of the separate state of Gujarat, became an early marker of his extraordinariness noticed by his mother at that time. Along with such narratives, Modi's involvement in ordinary joys of life normal for boys of his age at that time have also found mention in his biography which records his uncle recalling that "he (Modi) had a fondness for raw mangoes which he often plucked along with his friends from several orchards in Vadnagar. Modi's childhood narratives have been replete with instances of his extraordinary courage in tandem with his 'bold and masculine' image as a politician later in life. "There was a particular year when it had rained heavily and the lake was brimming to the surface and since there were crocodiles in its waters, no one was willing to swim to the rock and change the flag. Modi however, braved the conditions along with two other friends and swam to the rock and changed

the flag. The story is recalled with fervour on the banks of the lake the moment people get to know of my interest in Modi.” recalls Nilanjan in his book. Later, this incident has taken forms of a folklore with many versions like the one in which it was claimed that young Modi picked up a crocodile with his hand as Modi scaled heights of success in public life.<sup>17</sup>

One of Modi's childhood friend reveals about Modi's nature since childhood. 'There was one aspect of his personality that we used to talk among friends — that something had to enter his mind once and then he would not rest till it was accomplished — he was very determined.' He has also been active in theatre in school functions in which he has a fondness for playing 'larger than life characters. Life came a full circle when 'Modi' became the 'messiah cult' across Indian households as he became a mass leader of national level as the Prime Minister and supreme leader of his party, BJP. Nilanjan succinctly puts the account of his 'extraordinary childhood' in his book. "Modi's inculcation into politics began even before he became a teenager. When just twelve. Movement of troops (in 1962 Indo-China war) was common in those times and it did not take much cajoling for Modi to drop his daily activities and head to Mehsana to join RSS workers involved in voluntary work. Modi says that this period played a significant part in his political indoctrination as patriotism was the most articulated emotion and was in sync with the dominant public mood in Gujarat at the time — during 1965 war. By the time he was fifteen years old, Narendra Modi had — in a sense — participated in two wars, been part of a political agitation, had a regular association with the RSS, frequently interacted with visiting religious and spiritual gurus, was at the forefront of extra-curricular activities in school and assisted his father in running the little tea shop outside the Vadnagar railway station." Modi also shared anecdotes of his frugal life when he was a political nomad. "I had trouble washing my clothes so thought I would have to wash less if I cut the sleeves by half. I also thought that they would occupy less space in my small bag. So that is now the Modi kurta was originally made — I just took a pair of scissors and cut the sleeves."

However, as the public leader as he rose to prominence to become the CM, Modi is known to be very particular about his appearance and attire. Nilanjan observes in his book some aspects of his eye for details regarding his 'proper' look before the public. "Narendra Modi is known to be extremely finicky about his preferences and has a fantastic eye for detail. Modi deftly mixes and matches for casual social occasions and his collection of scarves or stoles that he

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<sup>17</sup> "Out in Print: How Narendra, the Boy, Picked up a Crocodile," *The Indian Express*, March 26, 2014, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/gujarat/out-in-print-how-narendra-the-boy-picked-up-a-crocodile/>.

drapes on his shoulders are often in contrasting colours to his kurtas. He follows the same pattern when wearing jackets or high neck coats also called Jodhpuris. Modi also has a weakness for designer fountain pens — Montblanc in particular. The Pracharak-turned-chief minister also likes to wear premium designer watches.”<sup>18</sup> Hence extraordinary capacity and qualities as well as need for proper public appearance, defined his careful inclination to be seen as beyond the ordinary in politics, despite humble origins.

- ***Life in RSS***

One turning point and a defining moment of Modi's life has been his very early association with RSS. His journey to become the *Hindu Hriday Samrat* starts from his journey as an RSS cadre in the early childhood. Nilanjan puts the importance of RSS in Modi's political career very succinctly in his book. “It can be said without any trace of doubt that integral to the political career of Narendra Modi — that began effectively from the early 1970s was his relationship with the RSS. The organization gave him a sense of “belonging” during his childhood and again after he chose to break free from the physical bondage of home and family. It was under the tutelage of the RSS that Modi got to hone his skills in managing people and setting up organizational systems between the early 1980s and 1990s. For young Modi, being part of RSS acted as an avenue for a child's curiosity and desire to be part of a larger world beyond home, family and friends.” Modi, as a young boy, enlisted himself into an RSS shakha as physical exercise taught at RSS was the only extra-curricular activity beyond school for him. Also, as someone who wanted to stand out amongst his peer group, his association with RSS shakha gave Modi a distinctive identity that he sought for himself.

Modi also gives a vivid description of his longtime affiliation with RSS and Sangh Parivar as a young boy. He narrated that he went to the Sangh from childhood. “Shakhas used to be held in our village from 1942 onwards — I do not remember exactly when I started going. But as a child, it was just a playground. Going there, playing and after that — they had some style of calling (or addressing with a specific honorific) people and organizing them, getting them to do things in a disciplined manner. Inculcating a sense of responsibility, making people understand what it means to be responsible, what is an organization's set up and how to work within it — all these things I learnt as a child.” However, despite Modi's early association with Sangh, Modi's tendency to rise above the crowd became quite apparent even in the initial days

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<sup>18</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2013).

of his public life. An RSS leader said that the earliest impression he had of Modi was that '...the behavioural indoctrination that is essential for Pracharaks had not happened in his case.' The source elaborated that Pracharaks are taught to make their self "subservient to the goal of the Sangathan" but in Modi's case there were evidences from the beginning that he often allowed his ambition to override the necessities of the organization."<sup>19</sup> Revealing a lot about Modi's political approach in the later years, he has been seen as someone creating an image for himself larger than the party and the government, first as Gujarat CM and then as PM.<sup>20</sup>

- ***Meteoric rise in politics***

Modi's dedicated role as a Pracharak and his stellar organisational prowess helped him to pave his way up to a senior organisational role in Gujarat BJP state unit in the late 1980s. Modi had demonstrated exceptional organisational skills in organising political programmes of senior BJP leaders- LK Advani's Rath yatra and Murli Manohar Joshi's Ekta yatra. Later, due to differences with his detractor in state BJP, former CM Shankersinh Vaghela,<sup>21</sup> Modi was shifted out of Gujarat to manage the BJP units in Chandigarh, Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab.<sup>22</sup> Modi, exhibiting his exceptional strategic prowess, ensured BJP's political prospects bloom in all these states by forging effective alliances and bringing in fresh leadership.<sup>23</sup> Modi, early on, embarked on shaping his image as a strong mascot of Hindu nationalism. It is noted that "during the 1999 Kargil War and the subsequent failed peace talks between Vajpayee and General Pervez Musharraf, Modi held frequent press conferences and often appeared on television, demonstrating the jingoistic fervour that would become his signature."<sup>24</sup> Though Modi had detractors in the state unit, recognising Modi's exceptional organisational skills, he was directly elevated to the post of CM of Gujarat in 2001 when the BJP state unit was riddled with factionalism and internal rift and the government was battered

<sup>19</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Vidya Subrahmaniam, "The Leader Who Is Bigger Than His Party," *The Hindu*, December 4, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-leader-who-is-bigger-than-his-party/article62109737.ece>.

<sup>21</sup> Rohit Bhan, "Modi vs Keshubhai vs Vaghela: The RSS Connection," *NDTV*, December 17, 2012, <https://www.ndtv.com/assembly/modi-vs-keshubhai-vs-vaghela-the-rss-connection-507742>.

<sup>22</sup> Harit Mehta, "Six-Year Banishment Led to Narendra Modi's Metamorphosis," *The Times of India*, April 1, 2014, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/six-year-banishment-led-to-narendra-modis-metamorphosis/articleshow/33040649.cms>

<sup>23</sup> Rohit Bhan, "Modi vs Keshubhai vs Vaghela: The RSS Connection," *NDTV*, December 17, 2012, <https://www.ndtv.com/assembly/modi-vs-keshubhai-vs-vaghela-the-rss-connection-507742>.

<sup>24</sup> Vinod K. Jose, "Emperor Uncrowned: The Rise of Narendra Modi," *The Caravan*, March 1, 2012, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperor-uncrowned-narendra-modi-profile>.

by national calamities and governance challenges. The then central leadership of BJP at that time, PM Vajpayee and deputy PM Advani, sent Modi to Gujarat to take over as CM. In a typical manner of showcasing his indifference towards power as a political 'ascetic', he first refused to take up the job but reluctantly took over as CM.<sup>25</sup> After that, there was no looking back for Modi in politics. He has the rare exceptional record of reaching the CM's post directly without even contesting any election before that.<sup>26</sup> Modi, using his terrific organisational skills and reinforcing his image as a strong leader, Hindutva advocate and governance man, became the undisputed leader of Gujarat who would go on to become CM of the state for three consecutive terms. The Gujarat riots to 2002 have denigrated Modi's image in the media and outside world greatly but he could sail through the tough times with remarkable resilience and popular support in Gujarat as he won successive elections in the states for more than a decade.<sup>27</sup>

Modi as an administrator is known for his centralised and unmediated style of functioning the party and government.<sup>28</sup> But Modi has also shown willingness to learn about governance issues during his initial days as CM as he has getting accustomed in his new role as an administrator. Modi is reported as someone who listened to his officers and bureaucrats and in the words of a very senior officer, has this '...great ability to make someone else's knowledge his own.' Eventually, he firmed up his position not only as a suave politician but a visionary administrator who was in command of the government.

- ***Development Man and Hindutva Mascot***

Once in government, Modi embarked on the mission to project himself as an able administrator who wants to turn the image of Gujarat as the most favourable destination for business. This has also been an attempt to transform his own image as an able administrator in the aftermath of the 2002 riots. The very next day of assuming his role as CM, "Modi began work in his new job. He directed diversion of Narmada waters to the dry Sabarmati river and held a video

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<sup>25</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Stela Dey, "When Narendra Modi Became Gujarat CM for the First Time on This Day in 2001," *Money Control*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/current-affairs-trends/when-narendra-modi-became-gujarat-cm-for-the-first-time-on-this-day-in-2001-9291421.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Shamni Pande, "Case Study: Strategy and Tactics Behind the Creation of Brand Narendra Modi," *Business Today*, June 8, 2014, 2025, <https://www.businesstoday.in/magazine/case-study/story/case-study-strategy-tactics-behind-creation-of-brand-narendra-modi-46222-2014-05-19?onetap=true>.

<sup>28</sup> "Remaking of Narendra Modi: How the World Sees the Gujarat CM Now," *India Today*, June 14, 2013, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/gujarat/story/remaking-of-narendra-modi-how-the-world-sees-the-gujarat-cm-now-170032-2013-07-11>.

conference with his district collectors telling them he would brook no delays and wanted to prioritize e-governance.”<sup>29</sup> Mega projects like the tallest statue of Sardar Patel on the Sardar Sarovar and Gujarat’s Shanghai — the GIFT City project, were aimed at projecting the state as more assertive and masculine, the same image that Modi has projected through his sartorial and theatrical style. Modi has shown the ability to blend governance initiatives with campaigns of political mobilisation.<sup>30</sup> Ajay Singh writes in his book *The Architect of the New BJP: How Narendra Modi Transformed the Party* about the Sardar Patel Statue construction project that took take under Modi’s Chief Ministership in Gujarat. “The project to build a giant statue of India’s first home minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, taller than the Statue of Liberty in the United States, was more a profound political statement than a whimsical endeavour. Modi, though not at the national stage then, mobilized not only the party cadre but also an army of his sympathizers around the nation to collect agricultural implements that would be melted to build the 182-metre-tall statue. It was promised that the contribution of over 5 lakh villages would be noted in a time capsule to be placed at the site for future record.”<sup>31</sup>

Singh further writes about Modi’s political style with which he consolidated his political position in Gujarat and then in national politics, he wanted more synergy between the party organisational position and work and the governmental vision. Singh notes in his book that “Modi had also realized from his Gujarat experience that the government’s welfare programmes would not be a fruitful exercise unless they were adequately promoted and got permeated in the people’s consciousness. Besides the government machinery, the party’s organizational structure is an effective tool to make people aware of these programmes right at the beginning.” He also notes about Modi’s grip over RSS in keeping them board with his actions in politics and government.

“Unlike the Vajpayee regime, when the RSS and its affiliates used to take potshots at the government for deviating from the ideological standpoint, Modi’s ability to check any drift was remarkable. Perhaps the one dominant reason for no bickering was Modi’s personality,

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<sup>29</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> "From the Archives 2014: When Modi’s Gujarat Model Inspired India," *India Today*, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/from-the-archives-2014-when-modi-s-gujarat-model-inspired-india-1985266-2022-08-08>

<sup>31</sup> Ajay Singh, *The Architect of the New BJP: How Narendra Modi Transformed the Party* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2022).

encompassing everything associated with strong nationalism.”<sup>32</sup> Modi, as CM, made it a routine to organise the “biannual summit branded as “Vibrant Gujarat”—a marathon matchmaking ceremony of investment pledges and signings intended to bring business to Gujarat and, not incidentally, to make headlines while doing so. Modi has turned the act of investing in what has long been one of India’s most business-friendly and industrialised states into a high-profile spectacle—and amplified the disclosure of annual investment inflows into singular triumphant announcements” wrote Vinod K Jose. This bolstered Modi’s image as a ‘pro-business’ leader- the architect of the ‘Gujarat Model’ who earned all praises from the business world as he was hailed as “Modi is “the next leader of India”, “a visionary”, “the unstoppable horse”, and “the CEO who can lead the country.”<sup>33</sup>

Apart from the development paradigm, Modi has carefully crafted his image as a Hindutva mascot laden with hyper-nationalistic jingoism. He introduced the platitude of having ‘fifty-six inches chest’ which is seen as Modi’s self-fashioning to project his alpha male image — the first male among the Hindus.<sup>34</sup> Modi is seen to have tactfully handled the criticisms of his government over the Gujarat riots and Muslim killings by positioning himself as Gujarat’s defender by tainting the criticisms against his government as a ploy to ‘denigrate’ and ‘defame’ Gujarat and Gujarati.

He also took out the ‘Gujarati Asmita’ Yatra to mobilise the Hindu majority in the state and he won a thumping majority in the immediate next election.<sup>35</sup> Modi’s exposure to Hindu religiosity has been a constant phenomenon since his childhood. Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay wrote “Young Narendra was a devout Hindu and liked going to temples in Vadnagar where he chanted the mantras loudly. According to the accounts given by Joshi and Modi’s uncle (father’s younger brother) — Jayantibhai — from a young age, Narendra was drawn to religion and took the lead in fasting on festivals and other days considered auspicious by Hindus.”<sup>36</sup> Modi’s carefully crafted dominant public image as the strong, unabashed, committed Hindutva

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<sup>32</sup> Ajay Singh, *The Architect of the New BJP: How Narendra Modi Transformed the Party* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Vinod K. Jose, "Emperor Uncrowned: The Rise of Narendra Modi," *The Caravan*, March 1, 2012, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperor-uncrowned-narendra-modi-profile>.

<sup>34</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man*, *The Times* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> "How Gujarat Became Synonymous with Modi," *Hindustan Times*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/how-gujarat-became-synonymous-with-modi-101668692310017.html>

<sup>36</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man*, *The Times* (New Delhi: Tranquebar Press, 2013).

right-wing leader, greatly shaped his identity the most notable right-wing leader in the country. Modi's political imagery on the dual plank of development and Hindutva got amplified across the country by effective use of digital technology and social media like never before in Indian politics.<sup>37</sup>

Narendra Modi is by far one of the few politicians who has learnt to use technology for furthering his political career through innovate ways of campaigning. Modi's tactful use of digital technology to create his ubiquitous presence in the imagination of the millions of internet users, helped to bolster his personal charisma manifold ahead of many other leading politicians in India.<sup>38</sup> Modi, in his advanced years as a statesman have tried to cultivate his image as a saintly philosopher-guardian of the nation who can lead the people out of everyday distress of life by providing periodic motivation. Modi, after taking over as the Prime Minister, addresses the nation in periodic intervals on radio in a show called *Mann ki Baat (Modi's words from heart)*.<sup>39</sup> The themes of the address in varied which includes issues of national importance as well as quotidian themes of everyday life that includes "scientific achievement of India, stories of common people and of the armed forces, youth-related issues, environment and natural resource related matters."<sup>40</sup>

Modi has also written quite a few books addressing many social issues. For instance, he has launched a book called *Exam Warriors* for school children that "aims to get through to students across the country on the threshold of examinations, and hopes to help them thread the needle with ease. The PM often addresses the concerns of students on his radio show 'Mann ki Baat'. He also holds a special student-centric show before the board exams."<sup>41</sup> Hence, attempts to

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<sup>37</sup> "2014 to 2019: Social Media, NaMo App, and BJP's Digital Campaign," *The Indian Express*, November 16, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/2014-to-2019-social-media-namo-app-bjp-digital-campaign-5448706/>.

<sup>38</sup> Shakuntala Rao, "Narendra Modi's Social Media Election Campaign and India's Delegative Democracy," *The Communication Review* 23, no. 3 (2020).

<sup>39</sup> "Mann Ki Baat Completes 10 Years: PM Modi Highlights People's Love for Inspiring Stories," *The Financial Express*, September 29, 2024, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/mann-ki-baat-completes-10-years-pm-modi-highlights-peoples-love-for-inspiring-stories-top-points/3625324/>.

<sup>40</sup> Vasudha Venugopal, "More Than 100 Crore People Listened to Mann Ki Baat at Least Once: Study," *NDTV*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/more-than-100-crore-people-listened-to-mann-ki-baat-at-least-once-study-3975334>.

<sup>41</sup> "PM Narendra Modi's *Exam Warriors* Book: Key Features and Insights," *The Indian Express*, April 3, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/what-is/pm-narendra-modi-exam-warriors-book-5050383/>.

transcend from a figure of power politician to a saintly statesman and guiding force for the nation, has been a crucial part of his cult-making.

### **Mamata: Streetfighter to mass leader**

Mamata Banerjee is perceived as one of the most prominent political leaders in the country who has been labelled as a regional populist.<sup>42</sup> With an illustrious political career as a 7 times MP, former union minister in several ministries, founder of the regional party in West Bengal, Trinamool Congress (TMC) which she led to end 34 years mighty Left Front rule in the state of West Bengal and established TMC as the dominant ruling party of Bengal with she being elected as the 3 times Chief Minister of the state.<sup>43</sup> However, Mamata's rise to power has been monumental and unprecedented as she rose from an ordinary household to become a formidable political force in India. Mamata, has earned the distinction of being one of the very few prominent female leaders in India who could build a party on her own and led it to power within a span of one decade by ending the powerful left rule in a big and complex state like Bengal. She now is the *de facto* leader of her party who is in absolute control of the functioning of TMC.<sup>44</sup> In the government, she is the sole face and driver of all governmental projects and welfare schemes.

Her mass image as a 'plebian' leader and her indispensability in her party and political landscape of Bengal makes her an appropriate case for studying her leadership style under populism framework.<sup>45</sup> Mamata belonged to a family with humble background and she rose to prominence without any family privilege or mentorship. She was born in Rampurhat in Birbhum district in a 'mud-built labour room.'<sup>46</sup> Banerjee belonged to a lower-middle class

<sup>42</sup> "Mamata Banerjee Personifies Populist Force in Indian Politics," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mamata-banerjee-personifies-populist-force-in-indian-politics/2012/05/20/gIQAsWMwdU\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mamata-banerjee-personifies-populist-force-in-indian-politics/2012/05/20/gIQAsWMwdU_story.html)

<sup>43</sup> "Mamata Banerjee's Political Journey: From Activist to Chief Minister of West Bengal," *India Today*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/photo/mamata-banerjee-west-bengal-chief-minister-political-journey-365470-2011-05-12>.

<sup>44</sup> "24 Years Since Forming TMC, Mamata Only Grew Stronger Among Rebellions," *Business Standard*, February 16, 2022, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/24-years-since-forming-tmc-mamata-only-grew-stronger-among-rebellions-122021600664\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/24-years-since-forming-tmc-mamata-only-grew-stronger-among-rebellions-122021600664_1.html).

<sup>45</sup> Ambar Kumar Ghosh, "How Mamata Banerjee Painted the BJP as an Alien Outsider to Beat It in Its Own Game," *Scroll.in*, May 13, 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/994479/how-mamata-banerjee-painted-the-bjp-as-an-alien-outsider-to-beat-it-in-its-own-game>

"India's Ultimate Populist," *Al Jazeera*, October 26, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/10/26/indias-ultimate-populist>.

<sup>46</sup> Jayanta Ghosal, *Mamata Beyond 2021* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2022).

family residing in the Southern part of Kolkata. Banerjee had to confront with major challenges since early age. She lost her father at the age of 15 and had to face great financial hurdles to support a large family of seven siblings. She struggled hard to make her family's ends meet and made her foray in student politics. And, then there was no looking back for her thereon.<sup>47</sup>

- ***The narrative of struggle***

For Mamata, her humble origins and struggling childhood besieged by poverty and her simple lifestyle even today gave rise to her plebian image in politics, that has helped to bolster her image as a leader who struggled her way to the pinnacle of political success. Political scientist Proma Ray Chaudhury observes in her paper analysing Mamata's populist political appeal that "among her supporters and followers in the AITC, Banerjee presents a moral leadership style that constitutes a clear departure from the instrumentalist political practices governing mainstream Indian politics. Banerjee's status as a single woman, professing complete commitment to the cause of political activism; her careful cultivation of an austere style of dress involving plain white cotton saris, rubber flip-flops, and jhola bags; and her demonstratively frugal accommodation, lifestyle, and dietary habits have also lent her popular legitimacy."<sup>48</sup> As a departure from Modi's self-abnegation of the family, Mamata though unmarried, is known to have taken care of her siblings amidst her struggling political career and emphasises the presence of her family (siblings, their spouses and children) with whom she still lives at the same home or adjacent houses in the same locality.

As union minister and her present stint as CM, Mamata has stayed in her family home, despite being entitled to a government bungalow. Mamata narrates with regret in her book how her public life and constant flow of people in the house to meet her have created inconvenience for her family members, especially for her mother, who could barely get any sleep at night, but 'they (family) have never objected.'<sup>49</sup> Mamata has narrated in her several correspondences how she had to support the family and take care of her siblings in the aftermath of her father's demise. Ghoshal, in his book, reveals that Mamata remains the glue, the uniting figure in the house, who has kept the family together. During annual festivities like *Kali Pujo* and *bhai*

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<sup>47</sup> Sambuddha Mitra Mustafi, "Sister Soldier," *The Caravan*, April 1, 2024, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/sister-soldier>.

<sup>48</sup> Proma Ray Chaudhury, "The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India," *Politics and Gender*, September 15, 2021

<sup>49</sup> Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2012).

*phonta*<sup>50</sup>, the CM is known to closely associated with the preparations and rituals along with her family members.<sup>51</sup> Some of her family members have eventually got into public life in certain ways. Two of Mamata's siblings, are associated with local clubs as patrons and members of Olympic and Football associations. One of her sisters-in-law have served as a TMC councillor at Kolkata Municipal Corporation. Finally, Abhishek Banerjee, her nephew, party's general secretary and de-facto number two within TMC, has reached the highest echelon of her political ecosystem.<sup>52</sup> But Mamata has never hesitated in publicly admonishing or downsizing any recalcitrant family member, as her claimed to snap ties with brother Babun Banerjee after he rebelled against party MP before 2024 Lok Sabha elections.<sup>53</sup> So, Mamata had to confront poverty in her childhood, support her family selflessly and remains the central figure as the matriarch of the house. Though she remained unmarried yet has remained closely associated with her family members in the capacity of a guardian as a thoroughly 'family person.'

- ***Claim of righteousness***

Mamata in her numerous correspondence in her memoirs have talked about harbouring an extraordinary sense of righteousness since her childhood. She regards her father as a source of her inspiration for leading a righteous life. Narrating one instance, she writes that "when I was young, my father taught me that true humanitarianism does not differentiate between caste and creed, Mamata writes in her autobiography. Inspired by her father, she recalls to have decided to stay beside the 'have-not' throughout her life." She reflects about her struggling childhood burdened by the responsibility of her family. "While her friends in the ninth standard would chat and banter, Mamata would sit quietly in a corner. In class ten, while her friends planned for college, or exchanged titbits on clothes and makeup, Mamata's mind was clogged with worries. My mother had been unwell. I would get up at 3.30 a.m., finish the entire cooking, get my brothers and sisters ready for the day, and then somehow make it to school. Again, after

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<sup>50</sup> It's a traditional tilak ceremony in which sisters apply tilak to their brothers called Bhai Dooj in north India and also referred as Bhai Phonta in West Bengal.

<sup>51</sup> "West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee Performs Kali Puja at Her Residence," *ANI News*, November 1, 2024, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/west-bengal-cm-mamata-banerjee-performs-kali-puja-at-her-residence20241101224831/>

<sup>52</sup> Arup Chanda, "Mamata's Dynasty Politics Ruffle a Few Feathers in Party," *The New Indian Express*, March 23, 2014, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2014/Mar/23/mamatas-dynasty-politics-ruffle-a-few-feathers-in-party-589741.html>

<sup>53</sup> "Mamata Banerjee Snaps Ties with Brother Babun," *The Hindu*, March 13, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/mamata-banerjee-snaps-ties-with-brother-babun/article67947665.ece>.

school, I would rush back to cook the evening meal. When did I have the time to dream of the future.”<sup>54</sup> She has shared different narratives to underline a crucial facet of her character, which is her ability to speak the unpleasant truth, even if she had to face adverse consequences for that. She recalls “But right from a very early age, I have come up against a lot of unpleasantness and problems which have only sharpened my instinct and voice to protest against what is wrong. For me, my plain speaking and inability to hide even unpleasant truths has had an impact on my life and my career. But it is something I still have not managed to control.”<sup>55</sup> She also wrote in her memoirs that as Congress (her erstwhile party) was in power in Bengal from 1972 to 1977, she has been offered jobs many a times. But she is refused to take up a job as she felt that she won't find time for public service while being engaged in a full-time job. However, even as Mamata rises to become one of the most powerful leaders in the country and three-time chief Minister of the state of West Bengal, she has refused to give up her simple lifestyle. She has continued to wear white cotton sarees and rubber sandals and lives in her modest family home in the narrow lanes of Kalighat in South Kolkata. After the formation of TMC, she had joined both NDA and UPA governments at the Centre as ministers as part of the coalition governments. But repeatedly she had resigned from the ministries citing differences with her allies. She has justified such acts as ‘giving up ministerial berths’ for the sake of the people.<sup>56</sup> She has constantly reiterated the ‘rhetoric of renunciation’ despite being at the centre of the political discourse.

- *A street fighter*

Her street fighter image emerging from student politics with an aggressive demeanor who successfully broke the three-decades old left citadel in Bengal helped to craftily create her political image as a ‘firebrand leader’ essential for the making of ‘populist bold’ leadership. Narratives are replete with her experiences of bearing the brunt of violence.<sup>57</sup> Mamata’s correspondences and her party’s official communication have continuously harped on the relentless struggle, physical violence, pain, insults and harassment that has been meted out on Mamata Banerjee by the then left front regime in West Bengal.<sup>58</sup> As the opposition leader of

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<sup>54</sup> Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Mamata Banerjee, *Jiban Sangram* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Ashlin Mathew, "Attack on Mamata: Violence Against Women Politicians a Barrier to Their Participation in Politics, Say Analysts," *National Herald India*, March 15, 2021,

the Congress party (before Mamata formed TMC in 1998) who raised her voice against the excesses of the left government, she has been subjected to many instances of serious violence leading to even fatal injuries. The most gruesome incident was the killing of 13 youth Congress leaders when the then Jyoti Basu-led government's police fired at the protesters in a demonstration. The agitation was being led by Mamata Banerjee, then the Youth Congress President of Bengal, who was marching to the state secretariat.<sup>59</sup> Mamata was severely injured in that incident leading to her prolonged hospitalisation. She recalls about her injury repeatedly in her life underlining how she has to confront its impact even today. "the area where the skull was operated on still swells up and there is often a nagging pain there. It was such a serious injury and obviously there must have been some clinical damage. After that incident in 1990, I still cannot sleep well at night. My body has taken so much battering that I am still alive is itself a miracle. But staying alive also means living with the physical pain of my injuries."<sup>60</sup>

But this incident cemented her political image as a 'bold and fighter' leader being trampled upon by the mighty left regime. Ever since Mamata formed TMC, she has been commemorating this incident on 21 July annually as 'Martyr's Day' during which she holds a massive public rally close to the spot where the 1993 firing took place.<sup>61</sup> While recounting the incidents of conspiracies and attacks on her, Banerjee's narrative makes substantial use of Hindu mythological tropes, undertaking a secular refashioning of religious metaphors in the process: "[T]hey make blue prints to kill me their battlelines encircling me like Abhimanyu" (Banerjee 1998, 163). In this context, her description in *New Indian Express* is revealing. "The TMC supremo's image as a fearless fighter, endowed with nerves of steel and political acumen who can become one with legions of her supporters, took shape after one such deadly attack when she was hit on the head by a CPI-M youth leader in 1990 and had to be confined to a hospital bed for an entire month."<sup>62</sup> Monobina Gupta writes in her book on Mamata. As someone who is "haunted by a constant apprehension of persecution and conspiracy, Mamata

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<https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/attack-on-mamata-violence-against-women-politician-a-barrier-to-their-participation-in-politics-say-analysts>

<sup>59</sup> "What Happened on July 21, 1993?" *The Indian Express*, December 29, 2014, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/what-happened-on-july-21-1993/>.

<sup>60</sup> Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2012).

<sup>61</sup> "TMC Shahid Diwas Today: Why It Holds Great Significance for Mamata Banerjee," *India Today*, July 21, 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/tmc-shahid-diwas-today-why-it-holds-great-significance-mamata-banerjee-1978037-2022-07-21>

<sup>62</sup> "Attacks and Injuries Shaped Mamata's Four-Decade-Long Political Career," *The New Indian Express*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/Mar/12/attacks-and-injuries-shaped-mamatas-four-decade-long-political-career-2275631.html>

sings a running refrain of pain and trauma. In others, she traces her fractious relationship with her (Congress) party, dwelling on her years of growing up, her struggle and her family. *Andolan*, published in 2009, compiles Mamata's thoughts, primarily on Nandigram, Singur, the *Rizwanur Rehman* case, CPI-M orchestrated terror and what she calls 'police raj'. Gupta further observes that in her memoirs like "struggle for Existence (1998) and *Ekante* (2003) are deeply personal and political." Mamata herself elaborately documents the struggles and sufferings in a number of memoirs.<sup>63</sup>

- ***Juxtaposing ordinary with extraordinary***

Banerjee's unique aspect of her political personality, that has contributed to her appeal as a relatable personality, is the visible 'humane touch' in her approach. Her childhood stories have not only been replete with instances of 'playing mischief', getting her dolls married with her friends, going for swimming in the river with her brother' in order to give a semblance of 'ordinariness' befitting a girl growing up in a lower-middle class family in 1970s Kolkata. This narrative has been tactfully juxtaposed with her 'extraordinary selflessness, struggles, determination and righteousness.' Monobina observes that "The most remarkable thing she carries from her own modest background into her books is an instinctive empathy for the poor. She articulates the relationship between the personal and the political through the shrill language of pain, trauma and victimhood, all drenched in drama." She has also written about very strong sense of religiosity and also her beliefs in supernatural forces and miracles in guiding her way through life by overcoming monumental challenges.

Mamata has always claimed to get her enormous strength from her deep belief in the power of divine blessings bestowed upon her. Monobina narrates that "among the many incidents narrated in *Ekante* (one of Mamata's memoirs), here's one that testifies to her belief in the magical manifestation of the supernatural: 'I had not gone to Tarapith for quite some time. It was in Delhi that I dreamt that I was offering puja there. On waking up I started thinking of making a trip. Returning to Kolkata I told my mother about the dream. She said a few days earlier an old woman had suddenly showed up at our house. And this woman too before disappearing said, "Ask your daughter to go to Tarapith.'" Her dream and the old woman's appearance, Mamata felt sure, were conveying a message. Needless to say, she went to Tarapith

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<sup>63</sup> "12 Books by Mamata Banerjee Published in This Year's Kolkata Book Fair," *The Indian Express*, March 12, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/books-and-literature/12-books-by-mamata-banerjee-published-in-this-years-kolkata-book-fair-7813115/>.

as soon as she could arrange it." Her belief that occurrence of rain on any of her important political programmes was a necessary good sign of divine blessing that is always bestowed upon her.<sup>64</sup> Even her survival from the deadly attack in Hazra in 1993 is also attributed to blessings of God on her. Her political communication is replete with religious invocations from Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda.<sup>65</sup> Recitation of religious scripture from diverse religions have been a ritual in her public rallies. As a departure from the class-based political rhetoric that dominated the political culture of the communist rule in Bengal, Mamata is seen as someone who have brought in the socio-cultural registers of caste and religion in the political discourse of Bengal.

However, her rendezvous with religion is very different from BJP's Hindu nationalism as she invokes diverse religious practices and slogans buttressing her secular credentials. Also, her Congress background and strong Muslim support base have kept her 'secular' image strong in her political career.<sup>66</sup> Her lack of sophistication in her communication, non-affluent family background, aggressiveness in combatting her rivals, her plebian lingo, attire and lifestyle belies the 'high pedestal' of elite (*bhadrolok*) culture that was prevalent during the left rule. Mamata's 'mass' image makes her the harbinger of de-elitisation of political culture in the state.<sup>67</sup> However, at the same time, Mamata has made conscious efforts to exhibit her affinity and interest in Bengali literature, art, songs and other avenues of culture in order to claim the intellectual space that she feels have been hitherto captured by the elite. Her numerous published books of poems, short stories and released written and composed Bengali songs, organising grand opening ceremonies of Kolkata Film Festival and book fair with megastars and artists, are all efforts to represent the intellectual space in the Bengali middle-class

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<sup>64</sup>Jayatri Nag, "Mamata Attributes Success to the Rain God," *Mumbai Mirror*, March 17, 2009, <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/mamata-attributes-success-to-the-rain-god/articleshow/15925086.cms>

<sup>65</sup> Kinshuk Basu, "Mamata Banerjee Has Always Been a Worshipper of Thakur, Swamji, and Sri Sri Ma's Ideals: Swami Suvirananda," *The Telegraph*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/calcutta/mamata-banerjee-always-been-worshipper-of-thakur-swamji-and-sri-sri-mas-ideals-swami-suvirananda/cid/1814684>.

<sup>66</sup> Ishan Mukherjee, "Historical Roots of Hindu Majoritarianism in West Bengal," *The Caravan*, November 29, 2019, <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/historical-roots-of-hindu-majoritarianism-in-west-bengal>.

<sup>67</sup> Dhrubo Jyoti, "Mamata's Massive Bengal Victory Is the Death of the Bhadrlok in Kolkata," *Hindustan Times*, November 29, 2019, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/mamata-s-massive-bengal-victory-is-the-death-of-the-bhadralok-in-kolkata/story-NiTwCP9NqVFCz0TIgd42SP.html>.

imagination.<sup>68</sup> Mamata's large number of books on varied subjects that includes chronicles of her long political life, achievements of her government schemes and initiatives, key political events, her early life and its struggles along with poems for both children and adults, tributes to legendary figures of Bengal, on 1850 heritage structures in Bengal.<sup>69</sup> Banerjee's literary and artistic credentials can be seen a concerted attempts to shed her 'anti-intellectual' imagery and adds to her 'extraordinariness' for being able to engage with her passions despite her hectic political profile. Banerjee has also made claims that she makes her ends meet only through the royalty of her books as she has never taken any salary from the governmental posts she has occupied throughout her life.

- ***Making of the all-encompassing cult***

As the head of the party, she has founded and presided over, she could command unquestioning obedience within the party and governance institutions building her strong personality cult. In the AITC's official self-description, the party is conceptualized as a personal creation of Banerjee.<sup>70</sup> The AITC's institutional discourse and public policy framework, therefore, also help enhance Banerjee's personalized leadership and the element of moral superiority in her self-fashioning. "Mamata's personality overrides her party. It's as if Mamata is the ideology, the party, and the politician."<sup>71</sup> Banerjee, with absolute control over her party and government, enjoys a strong personality-cult like habitual obedience amongst party leaders and cadres. As a woman politician, she has also simultaneously created an image of a caring leader that has earned her the moniker of *didi* which also embodies her capacity to provide maternal care and protection to her party and people. "Banerjee's personal association with welfarist schemes rolled out by her government also contributes to the development of her image as an ideology-defying leader, particularly in the context of the persistent opposition to the communist Left Front government, which marked a substantial part of her political career and subsequent ascent to power. Slew of pro-poor welfare schemes by her government is attributed to Banerjee's

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<sup>68</sup> Romita Dutta, "How Mamata Banerjee Unwinds Herself With Artistic Pursuits," *India Today*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/how-mamata-banerjee-unwinds-herself-with-artistic-pursuits-1921786-2022-03-07>

<sup>69</sup> "12 Books by Mamata Banerjee Published in This Year's Kolkata Book Fair," *The Indian Express*, March 12, 2022, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/books-and-literature/12-books-by-mamata-banerjee-published-in-this-years-kolkata-book-fair-7813115/>.

<sup>70</sup> All India Trinamool Congress (AITC). "About the Party," 2018, <http://aitcofficial.org/theparty/>.

<sup>71</sup> Shiveshwar Kundu, "Mamata vs Modi: Competitive Populism Will Be the Flavour of Bengal's Assembly Poll Next Year," *NewsLaundry*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/08/04/mamata-vs-modi-competitive-populism-will-be-the-flavour-of-bengals-assembly-poll-next-year>

childhood experience with poverty.”<sup>72</sup> Banerjee government’s highly popular welfare and social security schemes like *Kanyashree*, *Lakshmir Bhandar*, *Yuvashree* that involves monthly and one-time cash doles for young girl students, women of every household and unemployed youth. Her recent initiation of a popular welfare delivery initiative, *Duare Sarkar* (government at your doorstep) enabled her to establish the perception of a welfare state by taking the administration to the doorsteps of the people, the poor people in particular.<sup>73</sup> All these schemes which has gained strong traction amongst the lower-middle class and lower classes across the state, especially amongst women, it has further buttressed her personality cult as a ‘caring matriarch’ of the people.

- ***Anti-elitism***

Mamata’s plebian demeanour, lack of sophistication in her speeches and political communication, her aggression, lack of fluency in English, non-adherence to conventional modalities of politics known as sacrosanct during left rule, positions her against the ‘embedded elite culture’ in politics. That has enabled her and her party to project her image as someone who has emerged from the masses only to represent and serve them by fighting against the vested interest that comprises the established elite. This grandstanding has permitted Mamata to practice the politics of ‘anti-politics’ throughout her life. From the time of being a student leader who protested vehemently against left rule and governmental excesses by holding massive demonstrations, rallies and bandhs, danced on the car’s bonnet of Gandhian leader Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) in protest, Mamata has made her political career largely premised on aggressive confrontation against the power elite. It has still continued even as she went on to holding power in Bengal as she held demonstration against CBI operations in Bengal as Chief Minister few years back and routine protests and rallies are staged by her party against the deprivations of the Centre.<sup>74</sup> Even after being at the helm of power for three consecutive terms, she has never eschewed the image of a crusader, activist and resistance against the ‘political elite.’

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<sup>72</sup> Proma Ray Chaudhury, "The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India," *Politics and Gender*, September 15, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Jayanta Basu, "West Bengal Assembly Election: Social Schemes Secured Trinamool Victory, Data Suggests," *Down to Earth*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/governance/west-bengal-assembly-election-social-schemes-secured-trinamool-victory-data-suggests-76923>

<sup>74</sup> Anindita Sanyal, "Mamata Banerjee's All-Nighter 'Satyagraha' As Cops, CBI Clash: 10 Points," *NDTV*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/mamata-banerjee-to-go-on-dharna-after-cbi-kolkata-police-showdown-1987688>.

Proma Roychowdhury observes regarding Banerjee's anti-elite imagery that her "street-style politics was pitted her against the more restrained rhetoric of the upper middle-class bhadralok male leadership that helmed the Left Front government. In her autobiography, Banerjee reflects on the obstacles she encountered during her early days as a parliamentarian, such as her requests being repeatedly ignored by the Speaker of the House during Question Hour, as well as her personal insecurities regarding her emotional persona and lack of command of English. She categorized the Anglicized elite parliamentarians as "first-class citizens" while identifying herself with the "second-class citizens"—"ordinary" parliamentarians who lack "smartness" and "glamour".<sup>75</sup> Her anti-elitist credentials also stem from the fact that unlike many other female leaders in India, she doesn't belong to any political family or didn't enter politics under the patronage of any male political leader or mentor. Mamata's party, in its official document have also emphasised that Mamata's stature is due to 'her work' in public life.<sup>76</sup> The lack of palpable source of support for entering politics, have accorded a unique identity for Mamata as someone who have made it to the top 'on her own' without any privilege. This has tremendously buttressed her image as a 'self-made' leader who has struggled to thrive in the turbulent and male-dominated world of politics, reinforcing her claim of being outside the realm of established elite.<sup>77</sup> Monobina writes in her book that "Mamata Banerjee was always a 'contrarian'. Her inclination to strike out on her own, regardless of the party line, came to the fore during her first ministerial term itself. She was more than just a contrarian, as her party colleagues call her; Mamata had a problem submitting to authority. She refused to be bound by the rules within which members of a political party usually function. Each time she clashed with her party—over TADA, the Jain Commission report, the bifurcation of Eastern Railways—she grounded her defiance in lofty idealism, in the rhetoric of ethics, her conscience, human rights, protection of minorities and West Bengal's interests."<sup>78</sup> Her image as an aggressive fighter against the powerful elite have shaped her political personality. Ghosal recalls in his book that "London School of Economics professor Maitreesh Ghatak told me, Mamata Banerjee is a successful political entrepreneur of the discontent of Bengal. She used

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<sup>75</sup> Mamata Banerjee, *Struggle for Existence* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1998).

<sup>76</sup> All India Trinamool Congress (AITC). "About the Party," 2018, <http://aitcofficial.org/theparty/>.

<sup>77</sup> Mamata Banerjee, *Upalabधि* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2012).

people's dissatisfaction, their helplessness after the firing in Nandigram, as capital to make it to Writers' Building."<sup>79</sup>

Monobina Gupta, in her book, makes a succinct description of Mamata's personality that captures her populist appeal. Gupta observes "paradoxical figure that is Mamata Banerjee. She doesn't fit the frame of mainstream politicians or conform to the stereotypes about prominent public figures. It isn't easy then to tackle the combusive, nomenclature-defying subject that is Mamata Banerjee. So, we must eschew linear projections and unidimensional definitions if we are to understand her. The personality of the Trinamool Congress leader is fragmented, somewhat dishevelled. The personal and the political are enmeshed, often even in collision with each other. Mamata's flagrant display of wild emotion, her histrionics, and her inability to control a runaway temper, all collided sharply with her searing ambition to emerge as the alternative face of West Bengal politics. She didn't need sophistication; Mamata had her aggression."<sup>80</sup>

### **Kejriwal: face of 'new' politics**

The political rise of Arvind Kejriwal is perceived as one of the most unprecedented developments in Indian politics in the last one decade.<sup>81</sup> From leading an anti-corruption movement to forming a party and storming the party to power in the national capital, Delhi within two years, it's a story that defies many assumptions of party building and political consolidation in India. Kejriwal and his Aam Admi Party (AAP) is considered to be a revolutionary political force that has the potential of changing the contours of the foundational patterns of doing electoral politics and Kejriwal is often touted as someone who practices populist governance through 'anarchist political activism' and distribution of 'freebies' as welfare goods.<sup>82</sup> As Kejriwal's political epicentre is the national capital of India, the city-state of Delhi, his political rise and public appeal has received unprecedented media attention, further enhancing his political profile in Indian politics.

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<sup>79</sup> Jayanta Ghosal, *Mamata Beyond 2021* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2022).

<sup>80</sup> Monobina Gupta, *Didi: A Political Biography* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2012).

<sup>81</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, "Can Arvind Kejriwal Rescue Indian Democracy?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 28, 2014, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2014/03/can-arvind-kejriwal-rescue-indian-democracy?lang=en>.

<sup>82</sup> Sonya Fatah, "How Arvind Kejriwal Became a Populist for 800 Million," *Maclean's*, April 3, 2014, <https://macleans.ca/politics/worldpolitics/arvind-kejriwal-became-a-populist-for-800-million/>.

- **'Outsider' in politics**

Arvind Kejriwal, a former public servant and a well-known political activist, got nationwide recognition as one of the leading figures of the anti-corruption movement in 2011.<sup>83</sup> By 2012, Arvind decided to enter the political fray by launching a political party, Aam Admi Party (AAP) in Delhi and contested the Delhi Assembly election in 2013.<sup>84</sup> The party achieved a spectacular political achievement of winning 28 seats garnering 25.9 percent votes as a new political outfit formed just one year back. Arvind Kejriwal 'magic' which was premised on the 'anti-corruption' plank and he managed to defeat Congress stalwart and sitting Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit, ending her government's 15 years rule in Delhi. It was a spellbinding debut for such a young political party in the history of Indian politics.<sup>85</sup> Though BJP was the largest party with 32 seats, AAP could form the government with outside support from Congress with Kejriwal as the Chief Minister of Delhi. Arvind couldn't complete the full tenure as CM and resigned abruptly citing differences with Congress.<sup>86</sup>

But, since then, Kejriwal led-AAP became the household name for 'anti-corruption' plank and a hope for 'clean politics' in India.<sup>87</sup> Kejriwal returned with a thumping majority in 2015 Delhi state elections and became the dominant party in Delhi reducing national parties like BJP and Congress to 3 and zero seats respectively. AAP returned to power in Delhi with a sweeping majority even in 2020 elections and Kejriwal is serving as the third time CM of Delhi. AAP also made considerable inroads in few other states in India and went ahead to capture power in the state of Punjab in 2022 state elections resoundingly defeating the incumbent Congress party. This stunning achievement made AAP the only state-level political party to capture power in more than one state, that also within a span of one decade of its existence. AAP's

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<sup>83</sup> "India Anti-Corruption Activist Arvind Kejriwal Launches New Party," *BBC News*, March 8, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-19796991>.

<sup>84</sup> "Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party Is Formally Launched at Jantar Mantar," *India Today*, November 25, 2012, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/arvind-kejriwal-aam-aadmi-party-formal-launch-jantar-mantar-122520-2012-11-25>

<sup>85</sup> "Delhi Election 2013: AAP Makes Stunning Debut; BJP Short of Majority," *The Economic Times*, December 8, 2013, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/delhi-election-2013-aap-makes-stunning-debut-bjp-short-of-majority-in-delhi/articleshow/27095533.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>86</sup> "Delhi's Newly Appointed Chief Minister Resigns," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/15/world/asia/delhis-newly-appointed-chief-minister-resigns.html>

<sup>87</sup> Sudha G Tilak, "Arvind Kejriwal: India's Game Changer," *Al Jazeera*, October 27, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/10/27/arvind-kejriwal-indias-game-changer>.

political expansion attempts also made slow yet visible impact in other states like Goa<sup>88</sup>, Haryana<sup>89</sup> and Gujarat<sup>90</sup> amongst others. Hence, Kejriwal as the 'middle-class educated' and 'honest' man with a resolve to 'clean' the corruption and deep-rooted erosion in Indian politics created a compelling cult around him.<sup>91</sup> Kejriwal government in Delhi rolled out extremely popular governmental schemes of providing free electricity and water along with quality education and healthcare services to the people. This have also bolstered Kejriwal's image as a 'development man', especially for the urban poor and lower class in Delhi. Kejriwal has been touted as a populist for rolling out 'freebies' or free goods as governmental welfare as well as for his unique disruptive style of doing politics.<sup>92</sup> This warrants to include Arvind Kejriwal, a rising and powerful political personality in Indian politics, in this study in order to understand what kind of populist appeal he has and in what ways is it different from other leaders in India.

- ***From social work to politics***

Arvind Kejriwal was born in an educated middle-class family in Siwani, Haryana and his father was an electrical engineer and an alumnus of Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra.<sup>93</sup> Arvind received a good school education and has been a bright student. He went ahead to crack the IIT-JEE exam and graduated from the prestigious IIT Kharagpur in Mechanical engineering. Initially he joined the Tata Steel in Jamshedpur as an employee but left it to prepare for civil service examination. Regarding this it is reported that "As a young engineer with Tata Steel in Jamshedpur, Arvind Kejriwal sought a transfer to the social welfare department of the company, driven by the impulse to "do something" for people. When that request was turned

<sup>88</sup> Chaitanya Bagwaiya "Not Just Punjab: AAP Makes Significant Inroads in Goa," *Gomantak Times*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.gomantaktimes.com/news/elections-2022/not-just-punjab-aap-makes-significant-inroads-in-go>

<sup>89</sup> Aiswarya Raj, "In Haryana, AAP Played Spoilsport for Congress in Some Seats Where Kejriwal Campaigned," *The Indian Express*, October 12, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/in-haryana-aap-played-spoilsport-for-congress-in-some-seats-where-kejriwal-campaigned-9615978/>.

<sup>90</sup> Rutam Vora, "AAP Makes Further Inroads in Gujarat, Wins Five Seats," *The Hindu Business Line*, December 8, 2022, 2025, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/aap-makes-further-inroads-in-gujarat-wins-five-seats/article66239631.ece>.

<sup>91</sup> "Delhi Elections 2013: Arvind Kejriwal, the Giant Killer Who Swept Sheila Dikshit Out of Power," *The Economic Times*, December 8, 2013, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/delhi-elections-2013-arvind-kejriwal-the-giant-killer-who-swept-sheila-dikshit-out-of-power/articleshow/27088843.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>92</sup> Kaushik Deka, "Why Arvind Kejriwal Prioritises Freebies Over Fiscal Prudence," *India Today*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/why-arvind-kejriwal-prioritises-freebies-over-fiscal-prudence-2650531-2024-12-16>

<sup>93</sup> "Arvind Kejriwal Biography," *Jagran Josh*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/arvind-kejriwal-biography-1588597266-1>.

down, Kejriwal resigned.”<sup>94</sup> Arvind cracked the Civil services and joined the Indian Revenue Service and served in the Income Tax Department. However, since 1999, Kejriwal started getting involved in civil rights activism. He launched a movement called 'Parivartan' with his associate Manish Sisodia (who later on joined AAP and became Deputy CM of Delhi) in the Sundar Nagar area of Delhi. Parivartan worked to address the grievances of the common people regarding various governmental services like” the Public Distribution System (PDS), public works, social welfare schemes, income tax and electricity.”<sup>95</sup>

Kejriwal’s organisation continued a sustained movement to bring in transparency in the governmental services by reducing institutional corruption. He emerged as one of major votaries of the Right of Information Act (RTI), a transformational accountability mechanism through which citizen could obtain information from any public authorities regarding their work.<sup>96</sup> Kejriwal gave up his much-coveted government job in elite civil services and plunged into full-time civil and political activism to ensure accessible governmental services and accountable governance for the common people.<sup>97</sup>

During his young days after leaving the job at Tata Steel, Kejriwal worked with Mother Teresa in Kolkata and voluntarily participated with the Missionaries of Charity and Ramakrishna Mission in North-East India and at Nehru Yuva Kendra. Regarding this episode of his life, Kejriwal recalls, ““What do you want?” the mother asked Kejriwal, then all of 24. “I want to work with you,” he remembers replying to her. “Go and work in Kalighat,” she said” He describes his experience to serve the people at the missionaries of charity as a ‘spiritual experience’ that have lasted for a longtime in his life.<sup>98</sup> About Kejriwal’s sincerity towards his role as an activist, his friend writes, “I learned that Arvind stayed in a small one-room place

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<sup>94</sup> Rupashree Nanda, "My Days with Mother Teresa, My Coming of Age: Kejriwal," *News18*, December 25, 2016, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/my-days-with-mother-teresa-my-coming-of-age-kejriwal-1288183.html>.

<sup>95</sup> "Arvind Kejriwal Biography," *Jagran Josh*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/arvind-kejriwal-biography-1588597266-1>.

<sup>96</sup> Lakshmi Iyer, "Arvind Kejriwal Empowers People with RTI to Fight for Their Cause," *India Today*, September 6, 2004, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/offtrack/story/20040906-arvind-kejriwal-empowers-people-with-rti-to-fight-for-their-cause-789377-1999-11-29>

<sup>97</sup> "Arvind Kejriwal: Activist and Politician with Many a Surprise Up His Sleeve," *The Economic Times*, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/arvind-kejriwal-activist-and-politician-with-many-a-surprise-up-his-sleeve/articleshow/113430921.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>98</sup> Rupashree Nanda, "My Days with Mother Teresa, My Coming of Age: Kejriwal," *News18*, December 25, 2016, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/my-days-with-mother-teresa-my-coming-of-age-kejriwal-1288183.html>

close to the slum for a few months. We visited this place. 'You stayed here all by yourself? What for?' I asked, somewhat surprised. 'I was coming to the Parivartan office every day, and working with the poor people. I wanted to get a feel for what it's like to live around these areas,'<sup>99</sup> Kejriwal was awarded the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership, "the board of trustees recognizes his activating India's Right of Information Movement at the grassroots empowering New Delhi's poorest citizens to fight corruption by holding government accountable to the poor," the award organisers said in a citation.<sup>100</sup> Later on, his friend from IIT, Pran Kurup, recalls in Kejriwal's political biography that he authored "Arvind told me about donating all his Magsaysay Award money to form the Pacific Cause Research Foundation (PCRF), which would help his efforts in advocating for government transparency and citizen participation. Early on, Arvind talked about *Mohallas Sabhas*<sup>101</sup> and seeking people's inputs on how government funds ought to be used in the spirit of participatory governance."<sup>102</sup> He friend recalls his ascetic refrain about politics in his book. He was "simple, unassuming guy I had known since college. 'Guru, you need to become a *neta*,' I said in jest. He laughed and said, 'Hey, not me!'"<sup>103</sup>

- ***Clean Disruptive Outsider***

The Magsaysay Award and the subsequent involvement in Hazare's anti-corruption movement propelled Kejriwal into the public imagination as an 'educated clean man', untouched by the vices of politics, who has taken up the crusade against corruption to cleanse Indian politics. The entry of Kejriwal in politics raised hope in the people that he, as an outsider to the political system, who left the comfort of civil service job for social service, will bring some positive change in this 'decadent system'. His friend writes how Kejriwal's entry into politics as a non-privileged middle class salaried 'common man' brought a fresh lease of hope in people that change for the better can happen in politics. "He has ushered in a trend where politics is now being seen as a career by young professionals. Engineers, bankers, chartered accountants —

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<sup>99</sup> Pran Kurup, *Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Admi Party: An Inside Look* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>100</sup> "Arvind Kejriwal Selected for Magsaysay Award," *The Times of India*, July 31, 2006, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/arvind-kejriwal-selected-for-magsaysay-award/articleshow/1832474.cms>

<sup>101</sup> This is referred to the organisation of small public assemblies in the locality to connect with people to know their views on issues and challenges with availing governmental services and spreading awareness amongst citizens regarding their civic and political rights.

<sup>102</sup> Pran Kurup, *Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Admi Party: An Inside Look* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 2016.

people who never looked at Indian politics see this mechanical engineer from IIT Kharagpur without a dynastic surname make a space for himself and realise it's possible, after all."<sup>104</sup> Kejriwal, on entering politics disrupted the status quo by injecting an experiment with participatory democracy by getting the views of the common people, by using digital media tools on key policy issues and political decisions. For instance, "he invited suggestions from Delhiites on how the AAP government could prepare for the smog during the crop-burning season."<sup>105</sup> The chief minister's exhortation to people to act against dengue for "10 weeks, 10 o'clock, for 10 minutes" is another case in point. Kejriwal also sought public opinion on whether he should form the government with Congress support in 2013. "A self-marketing blitzkrieg is on – from being on TV fighting dengue<sup>106</sup> in 10 minutes to spreading himself all over digital media with his AK mobile app.<sup>107</sup> The interactive medium allows people to leave suggestions and questions for him that he then personally responds to.<sup>108</sup> But Kejriwal, after forming AAP, has been accused of solely controlling the party in a centralised manner.

An article writes about his fallout with his colleagues who supported him during his days of activism as well as in the initial period of his political life. "Another problem with Arvind Kejriwal is his mercurial behaviour. From his Jan Lokpal days with Anna Hazare, Kejriwal has loved and hated the same people. He picks faults in those who are closest to him and becomes the greatest enemy of his own allies. Anna Hazare, Prashant Bhushan, Kumar Vishwas, Yogendra Yadav, Kapil Mishra – Arvind Kejriwal managed to push away everyone who was instrumental in his rise. This tendency has also affected how the AAP's alliances have panned out." His cult hovering over the party became a major source of criticism against Kejriwal's style of functioning. A report notes that "Auto-rickshaws in the city are plastered with "I (love)

<sup>104</sup> Zainab Sikander, "5 Years On, Has Arvind Kejriwal's Magic Waned? Or Is He Still the Alternative Indians Want?" *The Print*, October 21, 2019, <https://theprint.in/opinion/5-years-arvind-kejriwal-magic-waned-still-alternative-indians-want/308651/>.

<sup>105</sup> "Kejriwal Seeks Suggestions from Delhiites to Reduce Pollution," *The Hindu*, September 7, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/kejriwal-seeks-suggestions-from-delhiites-to-reduce-pollution/article29356404.ece>.

<sup>106</sup> "10 Hafte, 10 Baje, 10 Minute: Arvind Kejriwal Leads Delhiites in Fight Against Dengue," *News18*, September 29, 2019, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/10-hafte-10-baje-10-minute-arvind-kejriwal-leads-delhiites-in-fight-against-dengue-2327121.html>

<sup>107</sup> Aneasha Bedi, "Kejriwal Launches App to Fight Fake News," *The Print*, October 16, 2019, <https://theprint.in/politics/kejriwal-launches-app-fight-fake-news/306579/>.

<sup>108</sup> "Kejriwal's 'Rule of 10': Stop Mosquito Breeding for 10 Weeks at 10 o'Clock for 10 Minutes," *Hindustan Times*, August 30, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/kejriwal-s-rule-of-10-stop-mosquito-breeding-for-10-weeks-at-10-o-clock-for-10-minutes/story-WgOWnUIRNT2Akh5mzELvMJ.html>

Kejriwal". The AAP seems to have taken a leaf out of the BJP's playbook, hero-worshipping their main leader to retain power in Delhi."<sup>109</sup>

- ***Governance plus pragmatism***

Once Kejriwal won the elections and became the chief Minister of Delhi, his government's entire emphasis has been on providing basic welfare and everyday civic governance to the people of Delhi. By providing free electricity and water up to a stipulated limit and improving the infrastructure and services of school education in Delhi, he successfully created a loyal support-base amongst the lower middle class and lower class in Delhi. In every rally he emphasised on the basic necessities that the citizens expect from their government which includes 'the ration card, driver's license, road construction, streetlights, corruption and all manner of issues he saw as pressing concerns in India.'<sup>110</sup> He made providing these services to Delhi people his personal mission creating a cult of himself that dominates the narrative around every governance initiative of AAP government. "Every child of Delhi is like my own son. No child is any less important for me than my own son. It is my duty to provide for all of Delhi's people because I consider them as a part of my family,"<sup>111</sup>

Though his political plank has been largely premised upon governance, BJP's strong Hindutva support in Delhi makes Kejriwal pragmatic enough to tout with 'soft Hindutva' narratives. "Kejriwal started to flaunt his private religiosity more publicly. He appeared on TV singing the Hanuman Chalisa – a prayer to the Hindu god Hanuman – and tweeted in Hindi that he visited the temple of the same god, even claiming that the deity spoke to him and praised him for his good work. Despite his promise of cleansing politics and practitioner of 'new' politics, he has shackled hands with parties that he fought against in many occasions, demonstrating his penchant for pragmatic politics."<sup>112</sup> From taking Congress support to form his first government

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<sup>109</sup> Zainab Sikander, "5 Years On, Has Arvind Kejriwal's Magic Waned? Or Is He Still the Alternative Indians Want?" *The Print*, October 21, 2019, <https://theprint.in/opinion/5-years-arvind-kejriwal-magic-waned-still-alternative-indians-want/308651/>.

<sup>110</sup> Pran Kurup, *Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Admi Party: An Inside Look* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>111</sup> "Teaching Should Be Most Sought-After Profession in Society: Arvind Kejriwal," *India Today*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/teaching-should-be-most-sought-after-profession-in-society-arvind-kejriwal-1596244-2019-09-06>.

<sup>112</sup> Darpan Singh, "Real Reason Kejriwal and Congress Aren't Friends Despite Threat of Modi 3.0," *India Today*, June 26, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/real-reason-kejriwal-and-congress-arent-friends-despite-threat-of-modi-30-2398143-2023-06-26>

in Delhi to supporting BJP-led Centre's article 370 abrogation law<sup>113</sup> in parliament, he has demonstrated political acumen for real politick and political expediency.

### **Conducive Conditions for populism**

For all the three leaders, many attributes of the traditional populism framework are strongly prevalent in their political journey and imagery. Three broad trends are most visible. First, the claim-making of being the underdog or victim of circumstances and unholy conspiratorial ploys have been the common trend for Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal, implying anti-elite predilections. The humble origins and struggles of childhood have further buttressed the victimisation claims for Modi and Mamata. However, self-imposed asceticism has been a strong recurring narrative around the political profile of all the three leaders. Second, the leaders have the propensity to project themselves as extraordinary and beyond the average, ordained to serve or lead the people, giving impetus to their supporters to create a messiah-like cult of their personality, often by subverting the institutions. Lastly, the claims of representing a 'people' are premised on a strong and distinct identity which is fluid and all-encompassing, strengthening their populist tendency of creating 'empty and floating' signifiers to mobilise more and more political support. It would be interesting to study how the three leaders communicate to strengthen such populist patterns and discourses and how is it being responded to by the people.

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<sup>113</sup> "Arvind Kejriwal Tweets Support for Centre on Article 370," *Hindustan Times*, June 10, 2020, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/arvind-kejriwal-tweets-support-for-centre-on-article-370/story-fxHSmd0sojRciJYUhRdcbJ.html>

# **CHAPTER 3: DISSECTING POPULIST POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

Political messaging is the most powerful tool in the arena of electoral politics. It is the fundamental and pivotal instrument for managing mass perception about a leader, a set of ideas or any policy decision. How a reality is articulated, interpreted and projected before the public determines the acceptability of the ‘constructed’ reality. Often, a leader is considered to be the most viable vehicle or medium to communicate a political message to the people. Though political ideologies, electoral agendas and policy decisions are made by complex, hierarchical structures within political parties, once a political message is finalised, it is disseminated to the people through the party leader. There might be other multiple mediums and channels like manifestos, print and television media campaign, social media content and party cadres which takes the political message to the people. But history bears testimony to the fact that it is the leader with a human face who would promise to represent or act on the political promise, is the most reliable messenger of a political message.<sup>1</sup> Also, the importance of leadership communication to the voters is increasingly becoming more relevant with the greater personalisation<sup>2</sup> of electoral politics across the world.<sup>2</sup>

There are many crucial aspect or forms of political communication. The most tangible and effective is definitely the verbal communication, when the leader is able to connect to the people through his speech. Also, there are symbolic and performative visual communication through leader’s gestures, attire, lifestyle and other activities which has the potential of shaping mass perception. However, the art of political communication is not much about expression and narration of facts, rather it is the ability to project and perform a version of reality that would be amenable to the masses. Such performance might involve pandering of people’s emotions, insecurities and aspirations. This has also, in some cases, paved the way for the rise of demagogues in many parts of the world, triggering crisis for liberal democratic discourses.<sup>3</sup> The rising salience of populist political discourse and populist leadership reinforces the research focus on leadership communication. The question is whether there is something unique about populist leadership communication? If yes, what is the nature of such communication? Is the political communication by the leadership enhancing the appeal of

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<sup>1</sup> Khairul Azmi Mohamad & Nooraini Othman, “Political Trust and Political Leadership Legitimacy: Implications on Voters’ Behaviour,” *Journal of Politics and Law*, Vol. 13, No. 4; 2020, ISSN 1913-9047 E-ISSN 1913-9055

<sup>2</sup> “The personalisation of politics: Why political leaders now lie at the heart of European democracy,” *LSE Blog*, January 19, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2021/01/19/the-personalisation-of-politics-why-political-leaders-now-lie-at-the-heart-of-european-democracy/>

<sup>3</sup> Zócalo Public Square “What History Teaches Us About Demagogues Like the Donald,” *Time*, June 20, 2016, <https://time.com/4375262/history-demagogues-donald-trump/>

populist politics across the globe? Research suggests that one aspect that has made populist political communication a powerful tool for connecting with the masses is its simplistic claims. The art of political messaging isn't a very easy endeavour in a complex world with multi-dimensional social, political economic and cultural challenges. The populist discourse, endemic to its characteristics, makes simplistic arguments to its audience. The simplistic claims might, many a times, be misleading as it tends to exaggerate or underplay real life conflicts, challenges, possibilities and threats. However, the explicable and simple, sometimes dramatic, articulation of such claims makes it endearing of the common people.<sup>4</sup> Populist messaging is usually premised on two broad planks. First, it makes a Manichean distinction of good and evil. The leader claims to represent the 'good people' against 'corrupt elite and outsiders.' The simplicity of the argument lies in the fact that all internal divisions based on class, ethnicity, culture, geography, age, gender, education, amongst others are ironed out to create a unified 'good and virtuous people'. Similarly, vague and subjective constructs, often unsubstantiated, based on common social prejudices are used to create the 'evil other.' Second, the populist leader's claim to represent the entire people, speak for all of them and promise to directly act on their needs, comes as a great assurance to the people. Though governance structures are multi-layered, bureaucratic, riddled by institutional complexities and procedural hierarchies, the promise of direct representation and prompt governmental response through one leader makes the accountability channel very clear and simple for a common man. This makes populist communication from the leader very attractive and compelling in the popular imagination.

This study seeks to understand the nature of the populist appeal of the three leaders-Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal. The content of their speeches and interviews have been studied and qualitative method have been used for doing a discourse analysis based on their communication. Select speeches from 6 key elections that fell within the time period (2014-2021) of this research have been taken as the sample for the analysis. Select campaign speeches of these three leaders from the two national elections (2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections), two state elections in West Bengal (2016 and 2021 Assembly Elections) and two state elections in Delhi (2015 and 2020 Assembly Elections) are taken for the assessment. For Narendra Modi, who is the tallest national leader of his party and the sitting Prime Minister, he delivers speeches in national as well as state elections. So, in his case, election speeches only

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Kittel, "Simplicity of Populist Messages and Its Effect on Citizens - A Survey Experiment," *ECPR*, 2021, <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/59504>

delivered in Bengal, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh have been sampled for research feasibility in this study. These three states also correspond with the regions where the fieldwork for understanding public perception on this issue have been undertaken. Election speeches give a glimpse of their communication in the field of electoral battle as a competitive politician aiming to capture power. Also, few select interviews and parliamentary speeches (Legislative assembly speeches for Mamata and Kejriwal)<sup>5</sup> on key issues concerning the government of the three leaders have been taken to analyse how the leaders communicate about key policy issues as administrators.

### **Unpacking Modi's political communication**

In this study, we have the opportunity to understand Modi's political rhetoric both as a political challenger as well as incumbent. Modi's electoral outreach in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections would reveal how Modi, then CM of Gujarat, made his bid for Prime Ministership by taking on the incumbent Manmohan Singh-led UPA government at the Centre at that time. First, most visible aspect of Modi's electoral communication has been his ability to project all his actions as unprecedented achievements. In every political rally that he went to address, he starts with commenting on the huge size of the rally as a historic mass gathering never seen before in the rallies of any other political leader. It gives two clear political messages. First, such rhetoric energises the gathering of being part of something historic and it further strengthens their resolve to support Modi. Second, it goes as a clear message to his political opponents, media and rest of the people who would watch this through media that Modi is getting unprecedented support wherever he is going, indicating his obvious political edge in the electoral contest. On one hand, this narrative motivates his supporters and creates an impression in the minds of the people about his political support and authority. On the other hand, it would demoralise his opponents as if the game is already lost. Modi makes the appeal to vote for him a national duty for the people. He attached a greater purpose in getting him elected to power. For instance, if he is addressing the rally in the early phases of the polls, he exhorts the people that the historic

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<sup>5</sup> Since both Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal are sitting chief ministers of their respective states, they are members of State Legislative Assembly or Vidhan Sabha of West Bengal and Delhi. So in their cases, speeches that they have delivered in their state assemblies have been taken. For PM Modi, as head of the Central government, he is member of the national Parliament (Lok Sabha or Lower House). So his parliamentary speeches have been analysed.

national duty to building the first foundation of a strong nationalist governance that can transform the label of ‘scam India’ to ‘skill India’ falls on them.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly in the course of the campaign in the advanced phases of the election, Modi assertively claims that his government has already been formed as his party has got adequate votes in the last phases. Now, he has come to the people to tell them that it is their duty to vote for him so that not only his government is formed, he is also able to have a strong government with an overwhelming majority. He puts a greater purpose and responsibility in the people for casting their vote for him.<sup>7</sup> Modi has mastered many ways to attract the attention and emotionally connect with thousands of people in a mass gathering. In one rally in Bengal, he apologises for arriving late at the meeting venue and he regrets for keeping the public waiting. However, he quickly adds that “Even if I am late for this rally today, I promise you that I will not be late in providing efficient governance to you and change your lives once you get me elected.”<sup>8</sup> This assurance automatically swayed away the masses both for his humility and his promise of development. Also, if he sees that the crowd is too big for the meeting venues and many people might be facing inconvenience to stand, he apologises but with another compassionate rhetoric. He says “Though there might not be enough space in this venue for all of you, please be assured that there is enough space for you in Modi’s heart.”

And the crowd immediately cheers for him keeping aside the inconvenience that they might be facing.<sup>9</sup> In many rallies, there has been issues of overcrowding and he is seen taking up the role of crowd management from the dais in his typical emotive style. He says, “My dear brothers and sisters, I take all your love and blessings with humility, with the head bowed down to you. I am extremely grateful for showering so much love on me. Your enthusiasm and support have been recorded by the media. But, now please don’t try to come forward towards the dais. Please stay wherever you are. I don’t want anyone of you to get hurt or injured because your pain is

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<sup>6</sup> “Turn scam India into skill India: Modi,” *Hindustan Times*, June 12, 2014,

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/turn-scam-india-into-skill-india-modi/story-YIOChmuaypUH78m7TqDhaO.html>

<sup>7</sup> “PM Shri Narendra Modi addresses public meeting in Mathurapur, West Bengal,” *Around Telegu*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BC39D1jRZAM>

<sup>8</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi addresses Bharat Vijay Rally in Asansol (West Bengal),” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, May 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/live/tFIGXsZG3BM>

<sup>9</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi addresses Bharat Vijay Rally in Asansol (West Bengal),” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, May 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/live/tFIGXsZG3BM>

my pain.”<sup>10</sup> Also, many a times, there are incessant chants of public cheering him with his name in the rallies with the slogan “Modi Modi!” This sometimes makes it difficult for Modi to continue with his speech. He has demonstrated exceptional skills to manage public euphoria. He politely urges them that he have seen and have taken their love and enthusiasm. He further urges that “Now please allow me to speak. Do you want me to give a powerful speech? Do you want me to talk about your wishes, aspirations and voices in your heart?” Then the crowd contains themselves with an emphatic “yes” after which Modi continues with his speech.<sup>11</sup> Modi’s speeches are replete with statements downplaying his political profile as a politician. He is heard saying “I have not come here to do politics”, “Modi doesn’t matter”, “Forget about elections.” This can be seen as his attempt to project himself beyond the partisan politics who has a reformist’s zeal to transform the nation and society.<sup>12</sup>

Another performative aspect that enchants the mass in Modi’s public rallies is his tactical use of punch lines in the middle of his speech. Modi seems to understand that long speeches inundated with information might be monotonous for the people in the audience who are standing in crowd for hours. So, he has ways to enthusing his crowd. For instance, while asking for votes from the crowd, he uses a Hindi punch line *Yeh dil mange more* (This heart wants more of your support).<sup>13</sup> Also, he deploys many slogans to energise the crowd, to project his machismo as the only leader who can change the lives of the people and also to discredit his political opposition. For instance, the rhetoric of ‘*Modi he to mumkin he*’ (If Modi is there then everything is possible) immediately captures the imagination of his supporters as they get reminded that ‘their leader’ is the only beacon of hope and make everything possible for them.<sup>14</sup> Modi also speaks about himself in third person as he takes his own name in his election

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<sup>10</sup> “Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses Public Meeting at Ranaghat, West Bengal,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgG2n3vZcXg>

<sup>11</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi speech during Vikas rally at Japanese Park, New Delhi,” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, September 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbbQYND0O8k>

<sup>12</sup> “PM Shri Narendra Modi addresses public meeting in Kolkata, West Bengal,” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, April 3, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2QB\\_x\\_AePk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2QB_x_AePk)

<sup>13</sup> Abhishek Bhalla, “Yeh dil maange more: PM Modi recalls Kargil War victory in Delhi,” *India Today*, July 28, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/yeh-dil-maange-more-pm-modi-recalls-kargil-war-victory-delhi-1574334-2019-07-28>

<sup>14</sup> “Modi hai toh mumkin hai: PM Modi coins poll slogan for Battleground 2019,” *India Today*, February 23, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/modi-hai-to-mumkin-hai-prime-minister-modi-poll-slogan-lok-sabha-2019-1463195-2019-02-23>

speeches.<sup>15</sup> With his rise in the national popular imagination since 2014, brand ‘Modi’ became a household name relatable to all. Relentless digital communication campaign ensured that his cult that reached to the last man through both traditional media like TV, newspaper and radio as well as new forms of social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook.<sup>16</sup> Since his name has become a mass sensation, he has used it in his political rallies to enthuse his supporters and reinstate his larger-than-life image. *The Print* in an article have addressed this trend in Indian politics of political leaders addressing themselves in third person. The article notes that this phenomenon is not only confined to Modi but has also been seen in the speeches of Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi and AAP leader, Arvind Kejriwal. Making a psychoanalysis that drives such self-fashioning amongst leaders, psychiatrist Shyam Bhat has been quoted in the article. “As a psychiatrist,” writes Bhat, “I find this fascinating. To refer to oneself in the third person (a phenomenon called ‘illeism’) points to an underlying psychological issue... Illeism is a symptom of discomfort with the self... narcissistic wounds are being defended by identifying with a grandiose false self while the true self is fragile...”<sup>17</sup> Another typical feature of Modi’s communication style has been to name his political rivals in the rallies in a dramatic mocking fashion that enthuses his crowds. Sometimes he addresses Rahul Gandhi as ‘*Sehezyada*’ (crown prince) to underline his privileged dynastic political background.<sup>18</sup> He also calls Sonia Gandhi as ‘Madam Sonia’ in many of the rallies.<sup>19</sup> He addresses Mamata Banerjee in the rallies in Bengal in the 2021 Assembly Elections as ‘*didi-o-didi*’ in a mocking way which has been criticised as a way of cat calling.<sup>20</sup> Modi’s dramatic and performative invocations of

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<sup>15</sup> Shekhar Gupta, “The ‘psychological condition’ that binds Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal,” *The Print*, February 8, 2018, <https://theprint.in/opinion/the-psychological-condition-that-binds-modi-gandhi-and-kejriwal/34281/>

<sup>16</sup> Vikas Pathak, “All about Modi, all about lotus — reading the optics of PM’s campaign in Hindi heartland,” *The Indian Express*, October 3, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/all-about-modi-lotus-reading-the-optics-of-pms-campaign-in-hindi-heartland-8965445/>

<sup>17</sup> Shekhar Gupta, “The ‘psychological condition’ that binds Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal,” *The Print*, February 8, 2018, <https://theprint.in/opinion/the-psychological-condition-that-binds-modi-gandhi-and-kejriwal/34281/>

<sup>18</sup> “Modi attacks Rahul Gandhi at Delhi Rally; calls him ‘Shehzada’,” *India TV*, September 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THSuSPRGLM>

<sup>19</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi addressing ‘Bharat Vijay’ rally in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uLGM1eA3rU&t=6s>

<sup>20</sup> Mythreyee Ramesh, “‘Didi O Didi’ a Catcall, Insults Women: Mahua Moitra, TMC Slam PM,” *The Print*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.thequint.com/elections/west-bengal-election/pm-narendra-modi-didi-o-didi-at-mamata-banerjee#read-more>

the names of his political rivals in the public emboldens his image as a leader who has the guts to call out his rivals directly and hold them accountable for their ‘misdeeds.’

- ***Attack on dynastic politics***

In 2014, when Modi, as the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP, was challenging the incumbent Congress-led UPA government, his main political adversary was the Gandhi family-led Congress party. So, his political rhetoric was categorically against Sonia Gandhi, the then president of the Congress party and Rahul Gandhi, the heir apparent and the emerging leadership face in the Congress.<sup>21</sup> He called Dr Manmohan Singh-led UPA government as ‘*Maa-bate ki sarkar*’ which implied that even if the then UPA 1 and UPA 2 governments were spearheaded by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, it was directly controlled by the first political family of the Congress- Gandhi dynasty led by Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi. He has also discredited the UPA government as the ‘*damad power*’ implying the political influence of Robert Vadra, Sonia Gandhi’s son-in-law.<sup>22</sup> In every political rally, he has launched a frontal attack on the Gandhi dynasty as he accused them of destroying the country and halting the development and prosperity of the country by indulging in corrupt and nepotistic dynastic politics in the last 60 years.<sup>23</sup> Modi emphasised in his typical dramatic and aggressive manner that though India has got its independence in 1947, India couldn’t embark on the path of development and good governance as the democratic politics was hijacked and maligned by one political family who only furthered their own interests over national welfare. Modi lamented in every election rally that despite India’s enormous developmental potential and India being a great civilisation, it couldn’t progress in a way it should have in the last 60 years.

In order to provoke nationalistic passion for aggravating mass anger against the Congress, he further said that “The world have prospered but only we are going backwards. A nation with

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<sup>21</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi addressing “Bharat Vijay” rally in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uLGM1eA3rU&t=6s>

<sup>22</sup> “Modi attacks Vadra over land deals, targets Congress on poll promises,” April 7, 2014, *Business Standard*, April 7, 2014, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/modi-attacks-vadra-over-land-deals-targets-congress-on-poll-promises-roundup-114040701288\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/modi-attacks-vadra-over-land-deals-targets-congress-on-poll-promises-roundup-114040701288_1.html)

<sup>23</sup> As the Congress party led by Gandhi dynasty have been in power at the Centre for majority of the post-independence period, Modi directed his attack on the dynasty as a whole and not only against its present leadership.

1.25 crore people is becoming a laughing stock in front of the world.”<sup>24</sup> The insinuation is that it is because of Congress misrule and misgovernance that India is being looked down upon with disdain in the world.<sup>25</sup> He pointed it out that many other small countries who got independence after India, have scaled heights of success due to visionary leadership. In one meeting he categorically stated, “UPA government is only known for their Gandhi bhakti.” By Gandhi bhakti, he doesn’t mean Mahatma Gandhi but mockingly implied Congress government’s greed for corruption money in a taunting manner– he referred to the Indian currency notes which has Mahatma Gandhi’s face printed over it. This wordplay enthused his audience in the rally. He further continued that” this country became independent so many years ago. But we can’t see good governance anywhere even today. Possibly because Congress has a habit of misgovernance.” Then he used the metaphor of a disease (diabetes patient) in order to describe the rot that Gandhi family led-Congress party has inflicted on the entire political system. “Just like diabetes, it attracts all problems once someone get it. Similarly, Congress’s corruption is rotting the country in every way.”<sup>26</sup>

He contrastingly juxtaposes the elite dynastic profile of the Gandhi family with his own image as a person who emerged from a humble and poor background. He has repeatedly made a comparison between Rahul Gandhi as ‘*Naamdar*’ (one who is known only due to his big family name) and called himself ‘*kaamdar*’ (one who is known by his hard work).<sup>27</sup> In every rally, he has made it a point to call himself “son of a poor mother” and “son of a teaseller.” He has projected himself as a “perennial victim of the wrath of the Gandhi family” who are conspiring to remove Modi from power.<sup>28</sup> But he doesn’t limit their “anger” to the fact that he is their political opponent. Rather, he goes beyond to say that “the Gandhi family, drowned in the arrogance of elite privilege, looks down upon him as a poor man and a teaseller.” He further implies that “they are abusing him because he doesn’t have the elitist background like them

<sup>24</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi speech during Vikas rally at Japanese Park, New Delhi,” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, September 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbbQYND0O8k>

<sup>25</sup> “PM Shri Narendra Modi addresses public meeting in Hooghly, West Bengal.,” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKDprXSGOUA>

<sup>26</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi speech during Vikas rally at Japanese Park, New Delhi,” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, September 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbbQYND0O8k>

<sup>27</sup> “‘Kamdar’ in fight against ‘naamdar’ this election: PM Modi in Rajasthan,” *Hindustan Times*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kamdar-in-fight-against-naamdar-this-election-pm-modi-in-rajasthan/story-ESuGwPU7c89qtbPiUrvQhI.html>

<sup>28</sup> Ruhi Tewari, “Modi calls Rahul’s hug an attempt to dislodge a poor woman’s son,” *The Print*, July 20, 2018, <https://theprint.in/politics/after-rahuls-hug-modi-plays-the-ultimate-victim-card/86278/>

and only, he, despite coming from a poor family, has the capacity to end their dynastic misrule.” In order to make a point about how the dynasty has been out of touch with the common people, while addressing a rally in the Gandhi family bastion in Amethi in 2014, he challenged the Gandhis to name at least few villages in the constituency.”<sup>29</sup> Modi has been very prompt and vitriolic in responding to the political jibes to his opponents. In one rally he roared that Rahul Gandhi has accused him of doing ‘politics of anger and hatred’. Then he aggressively reminded Rahul that it is his family and not he who has for long practised the politics of hatred in this country. Modi, not only attacked the Gandhi family for damaging the country or for attacking him, but he also pointed out how the Gandhi family has disrespected and deprived the tall Congress leaders who didn’t have family pedigree like them or didn’t belong to the Gandhi family.<sup>30</sup> He took out three instances and narrated it to the people in the rally to prove his point. Modi launched a frontal attack on the entire Gandhi family to counter Rahul’s jibe at him.<sup>31</sup> He first raked up the instance of Rajiv Gandhi, as the then Congress General Secretary, publicly admonishing the then Andhra Pradesh CM T. Anjaiah in 1982 at the airport, pointing out to his arrogance.<sup>32</sup> Then, he turned his gun towards Sonia and accused her of disrespecting former PM Narasimha Rao, by not allowing his cremation in Delhi and also by not permitting his body to be taken to the Congress headquarters. He further explained that as Narasimha Rao deviated from Nehru’s economic policy, the former PM has to face the wrath of Mrs Sonia Gandhi.<sup>33</sup>

Also, he accused Sonia of removing the former Congress President Sitaram Kesri from his position in an undignified manner<sup>34</sup> as Kesri also belonged to a backward community (OBC)

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<sup>29</sup> Piyush Srivastava, “Narendra Modi takes on Gandhis in their bastion Amethi,” *India Today*, May 6, 2014, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/highlights/story/narendra-modi-amethi-rally-smriti-irani-sonia-gandhi-rahul-191701-2014-05-05>

<sup>30</sup> Maulshree Seth, “Battleground Amethi: Narendra Modi ups the ante; takes battle to Gandhi den,” *The Indian Express*, May 6, 2014, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/battleground-amethi-modi-ups-the-ante-takes-battle-to-gandhi-den/>

<sup>31</sup> Shri Narendra Modi addressing "Bharat Vijay" rally in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uLGM1eA3rU&t=6s>

<sup>32</sup> “PM Modi recalls how Rajiv Gandhi publicly insulted T Anjaiah, ‘Dalit’ CM of Andhra Pradesh: Here's what actually happened,” *India TV News*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india-pm-modi-recalls-how-rajiv-gandhi-publicly-insulted-t-anjaiah-dalit-cm-of-andhra-pradesh-here-s-what-actually-happened-426523>

<sup>33</sup> Sushim Mukul, “When 24 Akbar Road shut its doors to ex-PM Narasimha Rao's hearse,” *India Today*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/history-of-it/story/congress-headquarters-24-akbar-road-pm-pv-narasimha-rao-delhi-cremation-sonia-gandhi-manmohan-singh-2662746-2025-01-10>

<sup>34</sup> Darpan Singh, “Sitaram Kesri, the Congress president who had his dhoti pulled,” *India Today*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/sitaram-kesri-the-congress-president-who-had-his-dhoti-pulled-2005800-2022-09-28>

like Modi.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, he pulled up Rahul for disrespecting the sitting PM of his own party, Dr Manmohan Singh by publicly tearing apart an ordinance cleared by Singh's cabinet, inflicting an insult on Singh's authority as PM.<sup>36</sup>

By taking up the cause of the Congress leaders who have been allegedly mistreated by the Gandhi family, he made strong push to make his attack beyond political party lines. He tried to convince the people that his fight against Gandhi family is not a mere political rivalry over power but he wants to call put the injustices that the family has meted out not only on the country but also on the leaders of the Congress party who rose from humble origins like Modi. Modi, by his gesture wanted to project himself as a defender of rights and dignity of all who are marginalised by the 'arrogant dynastic elite', cutting across party lines. So, Modi's continuous vitriolic salvos against the Gandhi family has been his systematic strategy to delegitimise their political appeal as a 'self-serving' and 'dynastic elite' who has been extremely arrogant by being in power for a longtime. He emphatically declared in a rally that the era of 'dynastic rule is over' now 'a poor mother's son will serve the nation.'<sup>37</sup>

- ***Appeal based on 'humble background'***

One dominant theme in Modi's political communication, both in political rallies and in media interviews, have been raking up his humble family background. As Modi's main political adversary at the national level has been the Gandhi family-led Congress party, he positioned himself as a non-elite poor man who has climbed up the ladder only due to the blessings of the people. He has constantly harped on the promise of addressing the distress and pain of the poor once he comes to power as he understands their daily challenges. His assurance stems of the fact that unlike the 'elitist Gandhis', whom he calls a 'royal family',<sup>38</sup> who are divorced from the pain and ground realities that the poor faces in the country, Modi understands the distress

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<sup>35</sup> Rishabh Sharma, "PM Modi recalls how Congress 'threw' OBC leader Sitaram Kesri 'on footpath'," *India Today*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-narendra-modi-sitaram-kesri-rajya-sabha-thrown-to-footpath-congress-sonia-gandhi-2498849-2024-02-07>

<sup>36</sup> "Rahul Gandhi trashes ordinance, shames government," *Times of India*, September 28, 2013, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/rahul-gandhi-trashes-ordinance-shames-government/articleshow/23180950.cms>

<sup>37</sup> "End of dynasty rule has come, says Modi," *Business Standard*, April 2, 2014, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/elections-2014/end-of-dynasty-rule-has-come-says-modi-114040201109\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/elections-2014/end-of-dynasty-rule-has-come-says-modi-114040201109_1.html)

<sup>38</sup> Andrew MacAskill and Rupam Jain Nair, "India's Modi prizes Gandhi family legacy from heirs," *Reuters*, September 27, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us/indias-modi-prizes-gandhi-family-legacy-from-heirs-idUSL4N11U30U/>

of the poor because he has lived in poverty.<sup>39</sup> In many of his communications in the rallies, the anecdotes that he shared have references of his lack of privilege in his early life. Modi spoke of managing without electricity in the village, going to school by foot and taking unreserved seats for train journeys.<sup>40</sup>

He reiterates that even today after being a four-time Chief Minister of a “prosperous state” like Gujarat, his 90 years old mother goes to cast her vote in a hired autorickshaw.<sup>41</sup> His makes two points here. First, he underlines the fact that he and his family has not given up their humble life despite occupying high seat of power in Gujarat. Second, he also underlined the fact that his old mother fulfils the national duty of voting even at this age, indicative of the sense of national service in his family. The most potent plank of launching his bid to national leadership as the PM of the country stemmed from his appeal to the common people that ‘someone like them’ who has seen poverty and lived a life of a common person, would represent them in the government. By asking the people to vote for him, he instils a sense of pride and dignity in a common voter who felt that the common man has the power to take Modi to the highest seat of power in the country and hopes that Modi, who has rose from humble origins, will mitigate the challenges of the poor. In every rally when he made his first bid to power as PM in 2014, he urged the people that “You have elected ‘rulers of royal family’ (Gandhis and Congress) for the last 60 years, now please choose your ‘sevak’ for at least 60 months and see what I deliver.”<sup>42 43</sup>

Modi has discredited the coalition government of UPA led by the Congress as a ‘*milawaati*’ and ‘*khichri*’ sarkar with one resolve of serving their own vested interest.<sup>44</sup> He launched direct

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<sup>39</sup> Rahul Shrivastava, “This Article is From Apr 03, 2015 'I Was Raised Among the Poor, Understand Farmers' Pain': PM Modi,” *NDTV*, April 3, 2015, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/i-was-raised-among-the-poor-understand-farmers-pain-pm-modi-in-bengaluru-rally-752038>

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “‘Messianic spell’: how Narendra Modi created a cult of personality,” *The Guardian*, April 19, 2024,

<sup>41</sup> Shri Narendra Modi addressing “Bharat Vijay” rally in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uLGM1eA3rU&t=6s>

<sup>42</sup> Sindkheda, “I am not a politician, but your 'servant': Modi,” *Business Standard*, October 7, 2014, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/i-am-not-a-politician-but-your-servant-pm-modi-114100700349\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/i-am-not-a-politician-but-your-servant-pm-modi-114100700349_1.html)

<sup>43</sup> “On Netaji's birth anniversary, Modi says 'Give me 60 months, I'll give you peace, happiness,’” *India Today*, January 25, 2014, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/narendra-modi-bjp-vijay-shanknaad-rally-gorakhpur-178016-2014-01-23>

<sup>44</sup> “PM Modi tells what kind of a government ‘Maha Milwat’ wants to form at Centre,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2l-7j423vuI>

attack on the sitting PM Manmohan Singh in his own inimitable style. He called Dr Singh a ‘Sardar’ (Sikh men are often termed as Sardar) but added that he is not ‘*asardaar*’ which means he was not an impactful PM.<sup>45</sup> Modi hinted at the charge against Dr Singh as being a puppet PM while the real power was being exercised by the then UPA chairperson, Mrs Sonia Gandhi. Modi also duded the outgoing PM by making a caricature of his name as he called him ‘(Maun) Mohan’ which means silent. He hinted at Dr Singh’s silence and inaction against the slew of corruption charges against his ministers and the UPA government.<sup>46</sup> Talking about the lack of coordination amongst the UPA allies, he said that there were many governments within the government hinting at the factional fights amongst the UPA allies and ministries. By painting gloomy picture of the coalition government which suffered from ‘anarchy’, Modi reinforced the need for having a stable government under a strong leader for providing proper direction and vision to the country.

This was also a way of encouraging people to vote for him in huge numbers so that he is able to form a majority government at the centre without much dependence of the allies. After becoming PM, Modi has repeatedly discredited the possibility of opposition alliance against the BJP and NDA as ‘opportunistic.’ He mocked that Congress is getting the corrupt leaders out of jail and stitching opportunistic alliance for stopping him (Modi). He pointed out that these parties which has plenty of differences amongst them feels the need to come together to ‘stop Modi’ and ‘remove Modi’ from power. He explains that under Modi’s abled leadership, strong legal action against many of these opposition leaders who are mired in many corruption cases is making their lives difficult, all the corrupt parties have come together to stop Modi.<sup>47</sup> So, he constantly buttressed his image as a strong administrator and crusader against corruption who would not spare the corrupt political elite.

- ***‘Proven’ record in governance***

When Modi emerged as a challenger to the sitting UPA government in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, his overarching pitch for ‘minimum government, maximum governance’ and ‘good

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<sup>45</sup> Sandip Roy, “Modi buries Manmohan Singh: For ‘hamara’ PM is an honourable man,” *Firstpost*, September 30, 2013, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/modi-buries-manmohan-singh-for-hamara-pm-is-an-honourable-man-1141769.html>

<sup>46</sup> Janaki Fernandes, “Narendra Modi mocks PM with ‘Maun’mohan Singh,” *NDTV*, October 29, 2012, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/narendra-modi-mocks-pm-with-maunmohan-singh-503033>

<sup>47</sup> Liz Mathew, “Opposition’s alliance is of corruption, negativity: PM Modi,” *The Indian Express*, January 21, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/oppositions-alliance-is-of-corruption-negativity-pm-modi-5547580/>

governance' was premised on his previous record in governance in Gujarat as the principal architect of the 'Gujarat Model.' In every opposition ruled state where he went to campaign, he drew parallels between the sorry state of governance in that state and narrated how he had transformed Gujarat. While campaigning in Amethi and criticizing the Gandhi family for not doing anything for the people of Amethi he told how he improved the female students' participation rate in the government schools in Gujarat. "When I took over as CM of Gujarat, I was dismayed to see low turnout of female students in schools. I went to every household in the scorching heat of the summer months of May and June to encourage the girls to go to school. I found out that girls after class 3 used to leave school because of no separate toilet for girls in the school. I was extremely ashamed when I got to know this. I couldn't sleep at night out of concern. Then I made 76 thousand toilets for girls in the schools all across the state. From Amethi, you have elected big PMs and big families (referring to Gandhi family). But even today there is no separate toilets for girls in the schools." Then he further rakes up the frustration of discontent in his audience. He asked the gathering whether they would accept this injustice. "Shouldn't you get the bare minimum necessities like toilets from the government? Have you asked for Mercedes car from us? Have you asked for a trip to America? You are simply asking for drinking water and toilet."<sup>48</sup> Modi's corruption charge got directed to Mamata Banerjee-led TMC government during his political rallies in West Bengal. As scams related to school teacher recruitment stormed the Mamata Banerjee government in Bengal, Modi launched a frontal attack on Banerjee government and told the people how his Governance model in Gujarat has made teacher recruitment process corruption-free.

He shared with the crowd how he has used the digital technology to make the recruitment process for teachers completely meri-based as computer-driven assessment is made of eligible teachers who got selected without any interview process. He dubbed the interview process in the school teacher recruitment as a ploy to install intermediaries for 'cash for job' scams. He proudly stated that who says corruption can't be controlled? He implied that there is always a way out to provide better governance but only the strong-willed honest leadership is required which only he can provide to India.<sup>49</sup> He flaunted the achievements of Gujarat in every political rally but also highlighted the achievements of BJP governments in other states like

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<sup>48</sup> "Shri Narendra Modi addressing "Bharat Vijay" rally in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh," *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, 5 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/live/4uLGM1eA3rU>

<sup>49</sup> "Shri Narendra Modi addresses Bharat Vijay Rally in Asansol (West Bengal)," *Bharatiya Janata Party*, May 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/live/tFIGXsZG3BM>

Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand at that time. He also credited the Vajpayee-led NDA government at the centre for bringing ‘*sushashan*’ (good governance) in the country after years of “Congress misrule.” But the main emphasis was on the ‘Gujarat model’ in order to project himself as an tested administrator. His pitch was more compelling against Rahul Gandhi who have had never taken any governmental responsibility in his political career with no record in governance.

- **Targeting the ‘elite’**

When Modi aimed to take over as prime minister by defeating the ruling UPA in 2014, he used a strong anti-elite rhetoric in all this political communication. He said in a rally that his fight is against dynastic politics, corrupt political families and 2000 powerful people who has halted the development of this country.<sup>50</sup> He indicated a larger elite immoral alliance between the ruling incumbent UPA government and the Delhi-based national media circle who are destroying the country. In one rally, he accused that the biased media, while covering rallies of the Gandhis and other Congress leaders, only shows the faces of the leaders on the dais and not the people in the audience in order to hide the low turnout in their rallies.<sup>51</sup> In many instances, Modi has also lampooned the ‘*political pundits*’ or political analysts as elites who makes political analysis sitting in the comfort of their AC rooms in Delhi. So, there are unable to judge the enormity of the public support that he is getting on the ground amidst the unimaginable amount of anger against the Congress and ruling UPA.<sup>52</sup> In many interviews, Modi boasts that after his 2014 electoral victory, many in Delhi (the English-speaking elite of Lutyen’s Delhi close to the Congress) expressed doubts about his ability to ‘manage things at the Centre, especially on the foreign policy front’ as the PM as ‘they felt he has stayed within Gujarat confined to only state politics until then.’ He then implied, despite being an outsider to the system, he grasped things quickly and ‘never bothered about protocols and made personal intervention in every minute issues for improving bureaucratic responsiveness and governmental efficiency.’ Regarding many governmental decisions like inviting the SAARC leaders for his first oath-taking ceremony in 2014<sup>53</sup>, going to meet the then Pakistan PM Nawaz

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<sup>50</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi addressing “Bharat Vijay” rally in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uLGM1eA3rU&t=6s>

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 2014

<sup>52</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi speech in Ahmedabad, Gujarat after historical victory in Lok Sabha Election 2014,” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, May 16, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQkwJgz\\_fKY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQkwJgz_fKY)

<sup>53</sup> “Inviting SAARC leaders for swearing-in ‘right decision at right time’: Modi,” *Deccan Herald*, June 1, 2014, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/inviting-saarc-leaders-swearing-right-2209285>

Sharif in Pakistan in an unscheduled visit, his government's surgical strike in Pakistan, Modi revealed how he went beyond the 'traditional bureaucratic complexities and hesitations' to take bold and innovative policy decisions in national interests which was unheard of in the tenure of any other prime ministers.

In other words, he made a point about disrupting the 'so-called conventions and procedural lacunae in governance that was laid out by the erstwhile English speaking power elite in Delhi and he brought new vision and courage in national governance.<sup>54</sup> Modi's fear mongering about the sinister interests of the 'elite' who have been critical to his government or party's ideology or policies have found many expressions through his tenure as PM. He and his party leaders called the leftist student leaders in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) '*tukde-tukde gang*' (group which is trying to break the nation), *urban naxals* (Maoist sympathisers who are part of the left-liberal social and political activism) and 'Khan Market Gang' who are all close to Congress, referring to the English speaking urban intellectual elite in Delhi who are critics of the Hindutva politics of BJP.<sup>55</sup> This is also a way of projecting himself an outsider or a rival of the 'English-speaking pseudo-secular elite in Delhi who are Congress sympathisers and working against national interest' and he as PM who doesn't belong to this 'elite establishment' is trying to save and serve the country and national interest despite hate, calumny and criticism from these groups.<sup>56</sup> However, he considers his bold and brave presence in national politics as he described himself and his party members as '*Sher ka bachcha*' (son a of tiger) to enough to intimidate the 'corrupt and morally compromised elite.'<sup>57</sup>

- *Appeal as an incumbent*

Modi's campaign in the 2019 national elections was dominated by the hyper nationalistic fervour in the after math of Pulwama terror attack and the subsequent military surgical strikes

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<sup>54</sup> Poulomi Saha, "At lunch with MPs, PM Modi talks about surprise 2015 visit to Lahore: Sources," *India Today*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-parliament-lunch-meeting-pakistan-visit-2015-nawaz-sharif-2499790-2024-02-09>

<sup>55</sup> "Run by Tukde-Tukde gang, Urban naxals..." PM Modi goes merciless on Congress," *ANI News*, September 20, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gz9wEjB6nbc>

<sup>56</sup> Shiv Visvanathan, "How Modi defeated liberals like me," *The Hindu*, December 4, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/how-modi-defeated-liberals-like-me/article6034057.ece>

<sup>57</sup> "Shri Narendra Modi addressing public meeting in Firozabad (Uttar Pradesh)", Bharatiya Janata Party, April 21, 2014," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6tIcSxOpfs>

done by Indian government in Pakistan to target the terror outfits.<sup>58</sup> Modi, constantly lampooned the opposition for raising doubts on the military operations in Pakistan. Modi, very quickly turned the allegations made against his government, into a matter of insult and indignity to the soldiers of this country. He discredited the opposition parties, especially his political *bête noire* Rahul Gandhi for being an anti-national who did not take pride in his own country's military expedition against the enemy state of Pakistan. Rather, he was raising doubts on the Indian operation on the similar lines with Pakistan government. Modi made scathing attack on the opposition for speaking in the language of Pakistan and acting in their interest, He called them to be more popular in Pakistan. He also dismissed the attempts made by the opposition parties to come together for an electoral alliance in the 2019 elections as *mela* (congregation) of the corrupt leaders.<sup>59</sup> He came with a report card of his government's achievements in the last five years which he claimed brought unprecedented international recognition and respect for India. He also highlighted his governments contribution in improving the life of the poor by trying to give them dignity with the construction of toilets in poor rural households, gas connections in poor families who cooked on firewood till then, drinking water pipelines and financial inclusion through Jan Dhan Bank accounts for the poor along with construction of houses for the poor.<sup>60</sup>

- ***Modi's varied appeals across states***

The tone of Modi's speeches varied across states and time depending on the political dynamics of the state in which he is speaking. West Bengal is a good example of this. When he campaigned in Bengal in 2014, his attack on Mamata Banerjee was milder as his primary focus of target was the Congress party's misrule in the national political context. His attack on TMC was part of the larger criticism of all the three traditional parties in the state-Congress, CPM and TMC, those who couldn't live up to the expectations of the people of Bengal despite

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<sup>58</sup> "Decoding PM Modi's first election speech of 2019 Lok Sabha elections", India Today, April 5, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/video/decoding-pm-modi-s-first-election-speech-of-2019-lok-sabha-elections-1488682-2019-03-28>

<sup>59</sup> "PM Narendra Modi 's speech at Meerut in Uttar Pradesh, first campaign rally of 2019 Lok Sabha polls", *Desh Gujarat HD*, 28 May, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-G6gbnOjco>

<sup>60</sup> Gyan Varma and Lata Jha, "Elections 2019: BJP sets the tone for poll campaign with 'ease of living' pitch," *Live Mint*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections/elections-2019-bjp-sets-the-tone-for-poll-campaign-with-ease-of-living-pitch-1552338465766.html>

getting elected at different periods of time.<sup>61</sup> Modi's attacks became sharper against Mamata Banerjee's government in the 2016 Bengal elections as BJP was gradually gaining ground in the state. In one rally in 2016 state election, Modi strongly corned the Mamata Banerjee government over Sharada chit fund scam, Narada sting operation and the collapse of the Vivekananda bridge in Kolkata.<sup>62</sup> Modi made categorical mention about all the major challenges that has grappled Mamata government at that time. "Chit fund scam led to a lot of loss of money for whoever invested. The people who are involved looted the poor after falsely promising good returns. He emotively added that "*bechara* poor gave not only their money but also their dreams to the Sharada scamsters. He upped the ante against Mamata and told that people involved in such misdoings shouldn't be in power. Politics will take its course but nobody has the right to loot the poor. The Vivekananda bridge collapse is indicative of the corruption in Bengal that has led to loss of life. Same faces (from the ruling party) featured in Sharada and Narada scam. They (TMC party leaders) said in front of camera that why so less money is being offered to them with such innocent faces as if they are so used to taking bribes."<sup>63</sup> Then he directly turned his gun towards Mamata and lamented. "I am surprised *didi*. I was a normal party worker when you were agitating against the left front regime in Bengal. I used to see in the news with pride and satisfaction that how one woman was fighting against injustice and corruption. But Didi how did you change so much? Modi asked Mamata in a tone mixed with disappointment and mockery.

He quickly compared the 'scam-ridden TMC government' with his own Central government which he claimed is committed to provide employment to the people. He then listed his government's achievements that included the Jan Dhan Yojan for financial inclusion, as the previous government (Congress government) didn't think of the poor during nationalisation of banks. Modi then flaunted that earlier bank never gave loans to the poor, now under his leadership at the Centre, every bank account holder is entitled to 2 lakh insurance cover. Through his government's Mudra loan scheme, business opportunities came up and gave relief to the poor from exploitative moneylenders. Then he directly staged a comparison with Bengal

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<sup>61</sup> "Shri Narendra Modi addresses Bharat Vijay Rally in Asansol (West Bengal) ," *Bharatiya Janata Party*, May 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/live/tFIGXsZG3BM>

<sup>62</sup> "Kolkata flyover tragedy god's message to save Bengal from Trinamool, says Modi," *India Today*, April 7, 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/kolkata-flyover-tragedy-gods-message-to-save-bengal-from-trinamool-says-modi-316846-2016-04-07>

<sup>63</sup> "PM Modi Address Campaign Rally in Howrah, Basirhat in West Bengal Elections 2016," *Mango News*, April 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8t2JAaavixI>

government- “Our model is Mudra Yojna, yours is Narada scam.”<sup>64</sup> In the 2019 Lok Sabha and 2021 state elections, in which BJP became highly politically ascendent in West Bengal and emerged as the principal opposition party, Modi’s attack on Mamata and TMC became more direct. In every rally, Modi directly took on Mamata on the key issues of corruption, political violence and dynastic politics with Mamata’s nephew Abhishek Banerjee’s rise within the TMC. Modi, in the 2021 Assembly elections, made a strong pitch for ‘*asol poriborton*’ (real change in Bengal). Modi’s pitch for real change was a counter to Mamata’s earlier slogan of ‘change’ with which she came to power defeating the left in 2011.

Modi’s claim for public support was that Mamata, in the 10 years of her rule, have failed to bring real change.<sup>65</sup> So, BJP led by Modi will usher in real change in Bengal. In order to connect with the people of Bengal, Modi started to make short punch lines, excerpts from poems of Tagore and opening statements of greetings in Bengali to galvanise and captivate the masses.<sup>66</sup> In the course of the campaign in Bengal elections in 2021, Modi kept a long beard which many speculated was an attempt to look like the Bengal literary icon Rabindranath Tagore. It also buttressed his ascetic saintly leader public imagery.<sup>67</sup> On governance, he also pointed out repeatedly how Mamata misuses the money that his central government gives for Bengal’s welfare and how the people of Bengal are being deprived of the Centre’s development projects because Mamata is not allowing the schemes in Bengal while the people from rest of the country are benefitting from it. He has also accused Mamata of being ‘Sticker Didi’ who uses the Centre’s welfare scheme funds and renames the schemes to project them as her own government schemes by putting her own ‘label and sticker’ on those schemes.<sup>68</sup>

Though Modi accused Mamata of favouring the Muslim minorities in Bengal by not allowing Hindu festivities like Durga puja to happen smoothly, he also alleged that Mamata’s secular

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<sup>64</sup>“PM Modi Address Campaign Rally in Howrah, Basirhat in West Bengal Elections 2016,” *Mango News*, April 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8t2JAavixI>

<sup>65</sup> “PM Modi pitches for 'asol poriborton' in Kanthi rally in Bengal, again,” *Hindustan Times*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/pm-modi-once-again-pitches-for-asol-poriborton-in-kanthi-rally-in-bengal-101616563541992.html>

<sup>66</sup> “Modi speech in Hoogly, West Bengal,” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKDprXSGOUA>

<sup>67</sup> Pallavi Ghosh, “BJP Sees Reflection of Tagore in PM Modi's New Look, Says Gurudev's Values to Guide Policies in Bengal,” *News 18*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/beard-trap-more-than-modis-look-bjp-will-rely-on-tagores-essence-in-policies-to-woo-bengal-3310901.html>

<sup>68</sup> “PM Modi addresses Public Meeting at Ranaghat, West Bengal,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgG2n3vZcXg>

politics have not helped the Muslim population in Bengal as Muslims living in Gujarat has far better socio-economic development parameters than the Muslim community in Bengal whom Mamata has just used as ‘vote bank.’<sup>69</sup> He also rakes up communal polarisation as he pitched for NRC and CAA in Bengal to identify the ‘Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators in the state’ and give citizenship rights to the Hindu refugees like the Dalit Matua community in Bengal.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, Modi’s electoral pitch against the Kejriwal government in Delhi has also been on the lines of how AAP government is obstructing the implementation of Centre schemes in Delhi for their own political interest.<sup>71</sup> In his 2020 Delhi state election speech, he attacked AAP government for stopping the Central initiative of building houses for the poor whereas people in other state could get it. Modi said in a frontal attack on AAP government. “Let me tell you my pain today. Delhi government is not wanting to give houses to poor people, not allowed PM Awas Yojna in Delhi. Out of 2 crore houses built all over the country under this scheme, not even one was made in Delhi due to the state government. You tell me shouldn’t the poor get pucca (concrete) houses? If Modi is doing this for the poor, should they (AAP government) do such politics to stop it? Friends, I am telling you with a lot of responsibility, till they (implies Kejriwal government) is in power, they will keep on creating hurdles because they don’t know anything apart from politics. And he gave a cautionary note to the people of Delhi, “for electing wrong government in the state, you have missed two decades of good development which should have been as per 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. But you couldn’t see any benefit of 21<sup>st</sup> century due to the inefficient governments (referring to AAP and Congress governments in Delhi). So, friends, after seeing the ruins of 20 years, there is only one way ahead for development- voting for BJP in Delhi.”<sup>72</sup> Modi, pitched both the opposition-led governments in West Bengal and Delhi as ‘obstructions and hurdles’ for his ‘spectacular development’ model for India and those states.

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<sup>69</sup> “Shri Narendra Modi addresses Bharat Vijay Rally in Asansol (West Bengal) ,“ *Bharatiya Janata Party*, May 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/live/tFIGXsZG3BM>

<sup>70</sup> “Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses Public Meeting at Ranaghat, West Bengal,” *Narendra Modi YouTube Channel*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vG2n3vZcXg>

<sup>71</sup> “PM Narendra Modi Public Rally in Delhi: Delhi Assembly Election 2020,” *Lokmat Hindi*, February 3, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPy2W\\_kA\\_n0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPy2W_kA_n0)

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 2020.

### Reading Mamata Banerjee's political messaging

Mamata's political communication during the election rallies have revealed that she also has a unique style of mobilising the people. Her personal touch in her rallies is one of the most visible attributes of her public appeal. In many rallies, she personally manages the crowd and urges the people to come under the shade so that nobody falls sick by standing directly under the sun due to heat. She is seen specifically to thank the women supporters in the rally for leaving their household work and coming to the rally by walking on foot. She shows her gratitude by saying that "My mothers and sisters, I want to touch your feet in appreciation and respect. You all remind me of my mother. Now you all are my own mothers and sisters." She also recognises each and every segment of society at the beginning of her speech- youth, Dalits, Adivasis, farmers, Self-help Groups, MNREGA workers, ASHA workers, minorities amongst others. She makes this gesture to show respect and claim representation for all these groups.<sup>73</sup> She also instructs her party officials publicly from the dais how to make it more convenient for the people who comes from faraway places to attend her rallies.

In the 2021 Assembly elections, which was seen as Mamata's high-stakes battle to stop the BJP's political juggernaut in the state, she was seen mobilising the masses in a unique way. Towards the end of the speech, she urged the women attending her rallies to do Ulu-dhwani<sup>74</sup> and the men to clap their hands as a way to enthuse the crowds. In order to attract the attention of her audience, apart from using the usual nationalistic slogans like *Vande Mataram*, she also invokes 'Joy Bangla' to hail the greatness and pride of West Bengal, cementing her regional identity as a defender and campaign of Bengal.<sup>75</sup> Another unique way in which Banerjee raises the excitement of the gatherings in her rallies is by giving slogans on every district or notable regions in Bengal. For instance, in order to indicate the ubiquitous presence of her party, Trinamool Congress, across Bengal, she takes the name of every district or region in Bengal along with Trinamool. '*Medinipur e Trinamool, Kolkata te Trinamool, Darjeeling e Trinamool, Jalpaiguri te Trinamool, Malda te Trinamool, Murshidabad e Trinamool, Nandigram e*

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<sup>73</sup> "Mamata Banerjee Addresses a Public Meeting at Diamond Harbour - 16.05.2019." *AITC Official*, YouTube video, May 16, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUR11LyngTA>

<sup>74</sup> Ulu dhwani is a Bengali tradition of ululating, or making a high-pitched, rhythmic sound, during festivals and weddings.

<sup>75</sup> "Bengal CM 'Mamata Banerjee' Holds a HUGE Rally at Balagarh, Hooghly." *Political Hub*, April 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQsNtG5MCQk>.

*Trinamool, Jangal Mahal e Trinamool.*<sup>76</sup> This is a strategy that automatically attracts the audience and they join the chorus with Banerjee. This is also a motivational call for her party workers and supporters to work hard for keeping the flag of TMC high in every region in Bengal. Mamata's tendency of making one single point by using multiple synonyms which are often rhyming, also breaks the monotony of her speeches and attracts public attention.<sup>77</sup>

- *Assurance of care*

Mamata's ability to exhibit a caring image of an elder sister gives a distinctive shade to her political appeal. After her resounding victory in the 2021 Vidhan Sabha elections amidst COVID-19 second wave, in her first press appearance, she appealed to all journalists and her supporters who gathered in front of her Kalighat residence to go back home and take a warm shower to protect themselves from the COVID-19 infection.<sup>78</sup> Her frequent administrative review meetings which are broadcasted live and seen by public on the TV is an attempt by Mamata to make the functioning of her government look transparent and accountable before the public.<sup>79</sup> What decisions are being made in the meeting? what instructions are being given by the chief minister? how is the CM dealing with public grievances and the challenges being faced by the public representatives and administrative officials? All of these things take place under public purview. In such meetings, Mamata is seen asking about the wellbeing of the MLAs, district officials and party leaders. Many a time, Mamata also scolds bureaucrats for mismanagement or laxity with government work and also snubs her party leaders of warring factions or bureaucrats on public platforms in order to resolve the crisis.<sup>80</sup> In a typical Robinhood style, after she came to know that tourism in forest involves high entry fees, she immediately announced in the public meeting that such fees will not be taken henceforth.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> "TMC Mamata Banerjee TMC Political Conference || West Bengal Assembly 2021 Election," *Au Bangla*, January 19, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_YsCyyVhUc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_YsCyyVhUc)

<sup>77</sup> "Bengal CM 'Mamata Banerjee' Holds a HUGE Rally at Balagarh, Hooghly." *Political Hub*, April 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQsNtG5MCQk>.

<sup>78</sup> "West Bengal Election Result: Mamata Banerjee's First Reaction After Big Bengal Win," *India Today*, May 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gpzhnd-1zYY>

<sup>79</sup> "CM Mamata LIVE at State administrative review meeting at Nabanna Sabhagar," *Vision Makers Entertainment*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kczqC1M4krU>

<sup>80</sup> "Administrative Review Meeting: Mamata pulls up intel dept over infiltration, orders strict action against encroachment," *The Indian Express*, January 3, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/administrative-review-meeting-mamata-pulls-up-intel-dept-over-infiltration-orders-strict-action-against-encroachment-9757382/>

<sup>81</sup> "Mamata's administrative review meet," *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/siliguritimes/videos/cm-mamata-banerjee-at-an-administrative-review-meeting-at-nadia-siliguritimesliv/671569227712631/>

These gestures strengthen Mamata's public appeal in two ways. First, she is seen as a guardian who cares for her constituencies but at the same time scolds them if need arises. This builds a very personal rapport based on trust between Banerjee and her political constituencies.

Second, these gestures enhance her image as the supreme leader and the final arbiter in the government who is above all factional wars within the party and government and also such actions put her beyond the allegations of mismanagement and shortcomings in her government.<sup>82</sup> Just before the Assembly elections of 2021 when Mamata was facing a slew of demands from the SC and ST community leaders, she did some strong speaking with them. She told "How much do you want? How can I give everything at once? I won't be able to give everything now. I am sorry. I have done enough. You can't coerce me to get things. I will do everything for you but slowly. If you pressurise a duck that gives golden egg to lay all her eggs at once, the duck will die. Then Mamata also listed down all her governmental work What have I not given you? I have given you free ration, education, healthcare, medical insurance, credit card for the education of the students, cash doles. Just go and see what BJP has done in the states in which they rule. Ask the people in Tripura how the government service people are not even getting their salaries. At least in Bengal, all government employees are getting their salary on time. You don't know what kind of party BJP is. Just go and see the situation of people in the BJP ruled states."<sup>83</sup>

Mamata, spectacularly scolds and gives strongly-worded dressing down to her own party leaders and workers in open public forums in front of the camera for indulging in corruption and threatens them with consequences if they don't mend their ways.<sup>84</sup> Mamata's typical bonding with her people makes it possible for her to admonish her people and shoot down unjustified demands from her constituencies. Her slogans like '*Khela hbe*' (the game is on) and

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<sup>82</sup> Avijit Ghosal, "Mamata live and livid: CM's televised meetings draw anger, appreciation," *Hindustan Times*, December 6, 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/mamata-live-and-livid-chief-minister-s-televised-meetings-draw-anger-appreciation/story-QvRW2HsGeAU5i54a5AP2oI.html>

<sup>83</sup> "Mamata Banerjee addresses the gathering at Trinamool's SC & ST community meeting," *AITC Official*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKoNNVge9yc>

<sup>84</sup> "Stop taking cut money or face jail: Mamata Banerjee to party leaders," *India Today*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/stop-taking-cut-money-face-jail-mamata-banerjee-party-leaders-1553915-2019-06-22>

her gesture of throwing football at the youth in her rallies during 2021 elections is another innovative manner of attracting the young supporters of her party and energise her supporters.<sup>85</sup>

- *Narratives of Victimhood*

One recurring theme in Mamata's political communication has been the narration of her personal struggles of life. In many political rallies as well as in the interviews, she has repeatedly talked about having to fight poverty since her childhood after losing her father at an early age. She has always claimed to have supported her family of seven siblings after the demise of her father. "I used to get up at 3 in the morning to cook for my family and got my siblings ready for school. I didn't allow my mother to do the household work. After completing all household work, I used to go to school. I had to manage taking care of my family and also simultaneously pursued my political career. I ensured that my elder brother could stand on his own feet by becoming financially stable so that he could support the family. I have done a lot of struggles in life."<sup>86</sup>

The fact that Banerjee became the pillar of support to her elder brother is also a projection of her maturity despite being the younger sibling. Her struggle is not limited to her family responsibility. She shares the endless struggles of facing the wrath of the left front regime when she fought the CPI(M)-led state government as the principal opposition leader in the state.<sup>87</sup> In several political rallies, Mamata shares vivid accounts of how she has been subjected to political violence and challenges.<sup>88</sup> She further explained her ordeal, "they broke my hand, inflicted severe injury on my head, I was almost about to die. The CPM henchmen tried to kill me by crushing my car and the pieces of broken glass damaged my eyes. I had to get my eyes operated. There is hardly any part of my body which didn't get hurt due to the left violence."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Romila Dutta, "Why Mamata Banerjee has introduced a 'Khela Hobe' divas," *India Today*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/why-mamata-banerjee-has-introduced-a-khela-hobe-divas-1837285-2021-08-07>

<sup>86</sup> "Mamata Banerjee addresses the gathering at Trinamool's SC & ST community meeting," *AITC Official*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKoNNVge9yc>

<sup>87</sup> "Attacks and injuries shaped Mamata's political career," *The Indian Express*, March 12, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/elections/attacks-and-injuries-shaped-mamatas-political-career-7224885/>

<sup>88</sup> "Public meeting at Nandigram, Purba Medinipur," *AITC Official*, January 18, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoInIU-xQYI>

<sup>89</sup> "Bengal CM "Mamata Banerjee" Holds a MASSIVE Rally in Purulia," *Political Hub*, May 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYTRY7wgoNY>

How I still managed to survive is only by miraculous grace of the divine.”<sup>90</sup> In the course of the campaign for the 2021 Assembly elections in the state, she suffered serious injury in her leg due to an alleged attack by her political rivals. The injury confined her to a wheelchair with her one leg plastered. Mamata toured the entire state to complete her political campaign in a wheelchair which invoked a powerful image of victimhood, pain and resilience in the public imagination. Banerjee later confided that she had a narrow escape in that attack and could have been more seriously injured. The attack has left deep damage in her leg though she chose to hit the road to campaign despite her doctor’s advice to take bedrest.

This is because she wanted to go to the people. As a sympathetic appeal to the women voters she said in a rally, “Though my leg is hurt, I am able to carry on because of the support of the legs of my mothers and sisters of Bengal.”<sup>91</sup> In Banerjee’s words, “It is true that I was badly hurt. I was injured in my arm, leg. There were bone injuries... ligament injuries. I suffered chest pain... I was greeting people from the car bonnet and the crowd pressed into me, the entire pressure was on me. My leg was crushed. I was given medicines and taken to Kolkata,”<sup>92</sup> As allegations of corruption became a major political plank against her government being raised by Mamata’s political opponents, Banerjee has been seen repeating about her humble and ascetic life. In a bid to demonstrate her righteous life and her selfless service in politics, she informed the people that she has never taken any salary from the government for all the public offices that she has had held in her long political career spanning across several decades.<sup>93</sup>

She has neither taken salary as an MP, MLA, union minister nor is presently taking any salary as the sitting Chief Minister. She claims to make her ends meet with the royalty that she receives from the purchases of her published books. She categorically highlights that she doesn’t need so much money to sustain herself. She is contented with less.<sup>94</sup> Her only motivation in politics is the opportunity to be able to do something for her people. Mamata firmly refuted any

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<sup>90</sup> Suryajni Roy, “Have been beaten up many times, earlier by CPM, now BJP has started, says Mamata Banerjee,” *India Today*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/west-bengal-assembly-polls-2021/story/mamata-banerjee-jhargram-rally-injury-bjp-cpm-nrc-1780333-2021-03-17>

<sup>91</sup> “Bengal CM "Mamata Banerjee" Holds a MASSIVE Rally in Purulia,” *Political Hub*, May 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYTRy7wgoNY>

<sup>92</sup> Monideepa Banerjee, “Mamata Banerjee Leaves Hospital In Wheelchair 2 Days After Leg Injury,” *NDTV*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/mamata-banerjee-to-be-discharged-says-kolkata-hospital-2-days-after-she-was-injured-while-campaigning-in-bengal-2389526>

<sup>93</sup> Subrata Acharya, “Mamata takes Rs 1 as salary,” *Daily Star*, March 11, 2017, <https://www.thedailystar.net/world/south-asia/mamata-takes-rs-1-salary-1374349>

<sup>94</sup> “Tweet by Mamata Banerjee,” March 31, 2020, <https://x.com/MamataOfficial/status/1244973922744815617>

allegations of financial misappropriation related to her party. "I do not take any privileges as the CM. I do not draw salary as CM or use government cars. I pay for myself and not from the government money for tea. This I used to do also while I was the Railway Minister. Even when I am visiting districts, I pay for my own expenses " Banerjee said.<sup>95</sup>

Mamata enjoys talking about her physical fitness even at such an advanced age and despite her physical injuries.<sup>96</sup> Her ability of being able to cover several kilometres by foot in her *padhyatras* (road show) is discussed by her quite often in many of her media interactions. When she was asked by a journalist that why she doesn't do roadshows in an open jeep, she responded that "she always prefers to do it by foot as it allows her to meet and reach out to more people." Mamata projects her governmental schemes as her tribute to her people in order to make their everyday lives better and easier. She proudly declares from her political gatherings that only her government rolls out a plethora of social security schemes for different sections of people covering almost all basic needs of the poor. It starts from cash doles at the time of child birth, cash incentives and cycles for female students for encouraging them to go to school, free tablets or mobile phone for students, widow allowance, monthly allowance for women in every household, health insurance for cashless treatment, free education, free healthcare at government hospitals, subsidised canteens, cash transfer for fishermen and farmers. "We have done it," she emphatically says.<sup>97</sup>

She categorically addresses the women in all her rallies by calling them as '*amar maa bon ra*' (my mothers and sisters) and highlights how her schemes categorically launched for them have given them some form of financial self-reliance as they can save the 'monthly allowance' money for family emergency or festivities.<sup>98</sup> When asked about the economic burden on the exchequer for supporting such cash transfers, Mamata uses a typical women identity card. She says only women knows how to run the household (government in her case) on a tight budget despite resource constraints. Her claim that her government represents the '*Maa Maati*

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<sup>95</sup> "I make a living selling books, says Mamata Banerjee," *India Today*, July 2, 2014,

<https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/west-bengal/story/i-make-a-living-selling-books-says-mamata-banerjee-191847-2014-05-06>

<sup>96</sup> "Watch: Mamata Banerjee's Workout Routine Includes A Treadmill And A Puppy," *NDTV*, March 7, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/offbeat/watch-mamata-banerjees-workout-routine-includes-a-treadmill-and-a-puppy-4013390>

<sup>97</sup> "Bengal CM "Mamata Banerjee" Holds a MASSIVE Rally in Purulia," *Political Hub*, May 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYTRY7wgoNY>

<sup>98</sup> "Bengal CM "Mamata Banerjee" Holds a MASSIVE Rally in Purulia," *Political Hub*, May 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYTRY7wgoNY>

*Manush* is a slogan that common people in Bengal can relate to and so it's a repeated reminder for the people that Mamata government represents the interests of the grassroots people or common people.<sup>99</sup>

- ***Aggressive and strong salvos against rivals***

Banerjee's image as a tough and strong political leader who takes on her political opponents effectively emanates from her frontal and aggressive verbal attacks against her opponents. Though the left parties have been Banerjee's traditional rival whom she fought for several years of her life to finally topple them in 2011, in the later years since 2014, BJP started gaining ground in the state which has traditionally been a marginal player in the state. BJP, in a surprisingly spectacular performance, won 18 Lok Sabha seats in the Lok Sabha election of 2019 emerging as the principal challenger of Mamata and her party TMC in the state.<sup>100</sup> So, Mamata's political salvos in the recent years got directed to the Modi-led BJP party.

Typical of Mamata's confrontationist style, she has dubbed BJP as a '*bahiragoto*' (outsider) party that is alien to Bengal's culture and heritage.<sup>101</sup> In many rallies, she has mocked the BJP leaders for wrongly identifying Bengal's historical legends and misquoting them.<sup>102</sup> She also lampooned BJP as an "conservative Hindi heartland" party who has banned non-vegetarian food in many states it has been in power and warned the people of Bengal that if BJP is voted to power, they will stop fish-loving Bengalis from consuming non-vegetarian food.<sup>103</sup> BJP has accused her of minority appeasement in Bengal, given her loyal vote bank of sizeable Muslim population in the state. She retorted with brandishing her Hindu credentials by chanting Hindu religious mantras in public rallies raking up her Hindu Brahmin identity, visiting temples and

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<sup>99</sup> "Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee on Ma-Mati-Manush | TMC News," *CNN News18*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PK5jV6lRnS4>

<sup>100</sup> Saubhadra Chaterji, "Lok Sabha elections 2019: A new challenge for Mamata Banerjee on home turf," *Hindustan Times*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lok-sabha-elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019-a-new-challenge-for-mamata-banerjee-on-home-turf/story-CsJAaatPGo3QAFaZ8sOH6H.html>

<sup>101</sup> "Mamata Banerjee Calls BJP Leadership 'Outsiders'," *ABP News*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbjcTkUYwss>

<sup>102</sup> "Mamata Banerjee leads massive rally in Kolkata on Netaji's birth anniversary," *India Today*, January 23, 2021, [https://www.indiatoday.in/india/video/mamata-banerjee-leads-massive-rally-in-kolkata-on-netaji-s-birth-anniversary-1761994-2021-01-23?fbclid=IwY2xjawlLrYBleHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHZJ2yrkyEMwq7S-9\\_vbO\\_c6f\\_xYBbPhTCmN1xWEa9GyFCVIP11vT2YqzuQ\\_aem\\_dLHM7HxEuo2ZCnVruiVC6A&sfnsn=wiws\\_pwa](https://www.indiatoday.in/india/video/mamata-banerjee-leads-massive-rally-in-kolkata-on-netaji-s-birth-anniversary-1761994-2021-01-23?fbclid=IwY2xjawlLrYBleHRuA2FlbQlXMQABHZJ2yrkyEMwq7S-9_vbO_c6f_xYBbPhTCmN1xWEa9GyFCVIP11vT2YqzuQ_aem_dLHM7HxEuo2ZCnVruiVC6A&sfnsn=wiws_pwa)

<sup>103</sup> "Mamata Refers To Fish Eating During Navaratri Row, Says 'BJP Will End Democracy, Kill Food Habits'", *India Today*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shNQdZhrQa4>

inaugurating Durga and Kali puja festivities in the state.<sup>104</sup> Every year, with great fanfare, she announces cash doles and subsidised electricity for all the clubs and puja committees those organise Durga pujas in the state.<sup>105</sup>

Mamata has also flaunted her religiosity in many public gatherings by talking about the fasts she observes. The annual worship of Goddess Kali at her family residence is done in media presence where she is seen participating in its preparations.<sup>106</sup> BJP has intensely campaigned against her party and government for letting the TMC cadres for fomenting political violence before, during and after elections against supporters, cadres and local leaders of the opposition parties for intimidating them. She, in turn, has accused the BJP of conspiring against Bengal by maligning it as a violence-prone state where elections are not held freely. She also foiled BJP's attack on her government for mishandling of certain notable rape cases by dismissing the allegations as blatant lies and responded with the instances of rapes in the BJP-ruled states.

She urged her political rivals that “if you want, you can abuse me as much as possible, but you shouldn't defame Bengal.” Implying that as the ‘protector’ of Bengal, she will never tolerate it.<sup>107</sup> She tactfully deflects all political attacks on the conduct of her government as BJP's attempts to malign the entire state of West Bengal.<sup>108</sup> She also practised fear mongering amongst the people by claiming that if BJP comes to power in the state, they would implement NRC and CAA to flush out people without proper citizenship documentation and turn “citizens into foreigners.”<sup>109</sup> As many TMC leaders defected to the BJP after BJP's political ascendancy in the state in 2019, she clearly highlighted that those who were mired in corruption and wanted

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<sup>104</sup> “West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee recites Durga mantra during rally in Bankura,” *The Print*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhJ3EWKLeKs>

<sup>105</sup> “Durga Puja 2021: Mamata grants ₹50k to each committee, discount on power tariff,” *Hindustan Times*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/kolkata-news/durga-puja-2021-mamata-grants-rs-50k-to-each-committee-discount-on-power-tariff-101631074393652.html>

<sup>106</sup> “Mamata Banerjee worships Goddess Kali, distributes 'prasad',” *India Today*, November 15, 2012, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/mamata-banerjee-worships-goddess-kali-distributes-prasad-121526-2012-11-14>

<sup>107</sup> Debashish Konar, “It hurts me when people speak negatively of Bengal,” *Times of India*, January 9, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/it-hurts-me-when-people-speak-negatively-on-bengal-mamata-banerjee/articleshow/106650291.cms>

<sup>108</sup> “Some people are conspiring against Bengal, trying to defame us: Mamata,” *Business Standard*, November 14, 2022, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/some-people-are-conspiring-against-bengal-trying-to-defame-us-mamata-122111401191\\_1.htm](https://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/some-people-are-conspiring-against-bengal-trying-to-defame-us-mamata-122111401191_1.htm)

<sup>109</sup> Shiv Sahay Singh, “CAA a trap to turn legal citizens into foreigners, says Mamata Banerjee,” *The Hindu*, April 27, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/caa-a-trap-to-turn-legal-citizens-into-foreigners-says-mamata/article68012745.ece>

protection from central agencies, have only felt compelled to join BJP in order to prevent their arrest. She dismissed them as “*Mir Jafar*” (betrayers).<sup>110</sup> In an extremely dramatic manner, she brought a dummy washing machine on the dais of her public rally in order to show how the corrupted leaders who defects to BJP are being saved from legal action for their ill-conduct just as washing machine washes the dirt from the clothes.<sup>111</sup> She used this argument for foiling the narrative that defections from her party is due to power tussle in her party and exit of key party leaders are indicative of TMC’s plummeting political fortunes. In her typical aggressive manner, she has launching scathing attack on PM Modi and other BJP leaders as a blatant liar, corrupt and communal who is bringing goons to Bengal.<sup>112</sup>

- ***Embodiment of Bengal’s identity***

Mamata Banerjee makes every attempt to personify the interests and well-being of Bengal as the undisputed leader and representative of the state. She reminds the people in every rally that she would leave no stone unturned to protect the interests of Bengal from the exploitation and sinister designs of the BJP-led Central government whom she calls ‘Zamindars and outsiders’ from Delhi.<sup>113</sup> By raking up the label of Zamindars, Mamata drew parallel between the exploitative designs of the wealthy landlords of the colonial era against the poor peasants and Modi-led Centre who is depriving the people of Bengal from their due rights. Mamata and her government has consistently attacked the Modi government at the Centre of not releasing the development funds which the state of West Bengal should get as disaster relief, GST compensation and social welfare schemes.<sup>114</sup> Mamata had threatened to launch agitations

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<sup>110</sup> Suman Mandal, “Bengal has never forgiven Mir Jafars, says Mamata”, *Times of India*, March 22, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/west-bengal/bengal-has-never-forgiven-mir-jafars-says-mamata-lashes-out-at-defectors/articleshow/81623161.cms>

<sup>111</sup> “Mamata Banerjee's Laundry Day With "BJP Washing Machine", *NDTV*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rfWo1gqQVo>

<sup>112</sup> “Mamata Banerjee calls PM Modi 'liar', accuses BJP of bringing goons to Bengal,” *Economic Times*, May 24, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/west-bengal/mamata-banerjee-calls-pm-modi-liar-accuses-bjp-of-bringing-goons-to-bengal/articleshow/81667027.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>113</sup> “Ahead of March 10 Brigade rally, Mamata cautions people of Bengal against ‘outsider zamindars’,” *The Indian Express*, March 6, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/mamata-banerjee-brigade-rally-bengal-9199698/>

<sup>114</sup> “Don't Want Alms”: Mamata Banerjee Says Bengal Will Pay MGNREGA Workers' Dues,” *NDTV*, February 3, 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/dont-want-alms-mamata-banerjee-says-bengal-will-pay-mgnrega-workers-dues-4986823>

against the Centre if they don't give the pending funds for the MNREGA scheme in Bengal.<sup>115</sup> However, she has also invoked regional pride, self-esteem and Bengal's ability to sustain itself by declaring that her government will fund the MNREGA scheme if the Centre doesn't give as Bengal can arrange for its own sustenance.<sup>116</sup> But Centre should give the money as it belongs to the people of Bengal and the state has a right over its own money. Mamata alleges BJP's conspiracy in depriving Bengal and halting its development as they want revenge from the people of Bengal for not electing BJP as the ruling party in the state.<sup>117</sup> Banerjee in her unique way of projecting victimhood in the hands of the BJP, has accused them to use the political machinery of central agencies like ED, CBI, CRPF and Centre's fact-finding teams to harass and humiliate her and the state government of West Bengal and defame Bengal.<sup>118</sup> As BJP levels allegations of corruption against Mamata and her ministers, she ups the ante against the BJP and the Central government to be corrupt who is using money and muscle powering to destabilise her government.<sup>119</sup> She alleges how the entire political machinery of the government of India along with the biased media is being used against her government only because she has the guts to fight the BJP in India.<sup>120</sup>

She also discredits the other opposition parties like left and Congress who has formed 'unholy alliance' against her and claims that they are also secretly aligning with the BJP to corner her in the state.<sup>121</sup> She dubs her former party, Congress as 'arrogant' and 'incapable' of fighting the

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<sup>115</sup> Mamata says Central funds not reaching States, threatens to launch agitation, *Hindu Business Line*, December 7, 2021, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/mamata-says-central-funds-not-reaching-states-threatens-to-launch-agitation/article7562324.ece>

<sup>116</sup> Shiv Sahay Singh, "Mamata launches housing scheme for rural poor in Bengal," *The Hindu*, December 18, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/west-bengal/mamata-launches-housing-scheme-for-rural-poor-in-bengal/article68997550.ece>

<sup>117</sup> Sobhana K Nair and Shiv Sahay Singh, "Mamata Banerjee to stage dharna against Centre for 'deliberately depriving' West Bengal of funds," *The Hindu*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/mamata-to-stage-dharna-over-centres-discrimination-towards-west-bengal/article66645174.ece>

<sup>118</sup> "Centre 'a cruel govt', Gujarat will never rule Bengal: Mamata day after PM's attack," *The Indian Express*, February 8, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/centre-a-cruel-government-gujarat-will-never-rule-bengal-mamata-day-after-pms-attack-7180148/>

<sup>119</sup> Saurabh Gupta, "Mamata Banerjee Tears Into Fact-Finding Team Probing Ram Navami Violence," *NDTV*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/mamata-banerjee-tears-into-fact-finding-team-probing-ram-navami-violence-3937548>

<sup>120</sup> "Journalists biased, says Mamata Banerjee," *Times of India*, May 13, 2014, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/journalists-biased-says-mamata-banerjee/articleshow/35043995.cms>

<sup>121</sup> Vaibhav Tiwari, "Mamata Banerjee attacks Congress-CPI(M) tie-up, says 'won't share single seat' in West Bengal," *Hindustan Times*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/mamata-banerjee-attacks-congress-says-wont-share-single-seat-in-bengal-101706701942305.html>

BJP which only she can fight with her bold and aggressive politics.<sup>122</sup> She has been effectively tactful in personifying herself and her party with Bengal and projected BJP as a party working against the state's interest. When she won the 2021 state election, she called in "Bengal's victory." She used the slogan "Bangla Bachchao, BJP Hatao" to implore the people for saving Bengal by voting against BJP.<sup>123</sup> And whenever BJP attacked her for making Bengal's coffers empty, she turned it tactfully as an attack on Bengal's dignity by accusing BJP to calling Bengal 'pauper.'<sup>124</sup> Such communication tactics has made Banerjee's pitch as the defender of Bengal very compelling.

### Unpacking Arvind Kejriwal's political communication

Arvind Kejriwal, who intends to create his popular appeal as someone who is solely focussed on delivering governance and welfare to the common man, is usually seen to make secular greetings to the gathering in his public rallies- *Namaste, Aadaab, Salam-alaikum* reaching out to the people of all religions.<sup>125</sup> He expresses his eternal gratitude to the people a number of times in his speeches for making him the CM of Delhi, '*Aapne is naachiz ko CM bana di*' (You have made a nobody the CM of Delhi). He further adds that "no one knew who was Kejriwal. You have given me so much love. Then he further raises the emotive appeal and claims that even if I die for you, I won't be able to repay my debt to you."<sup>126</sup> This is consciously done to drive the point that despite being in power, he has not given up his humility, simplicity and responsibility of serving the people. He constantly harps on the fact that how hard he has worked for the people of Delhi and delivered governance from the time he and his party has been elected to power in Delhi. He explained in a dramatic manner. "Once you gave me this responsibility of serving Delhi, I and my ministers don't sleep at night. We remain awake to

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<sup>122</sup> "Mamata steps up attack on Congress, says it came to Bengal to woo Muslims," *Deccan Herald*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/west-bengal/mamata-steps-up-attack-on-congress-says-it-came-to-bengal-to-woo-muslims-2877547>

<sup>123</sup> "TMC to start "BJP Hatao Desh Bachao" campaign from 15th august," *Zee News*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfDcDXU0ZWo>

<sup>124</sup> "PM Modi, Mamata launches all out offensive as truncated campaign ends in Bengal," *Times of India*, May 16, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections/west-bengal/news/pm-modi-mamata-launch-all-out-offensive-as-truncated-campaign-ends-in-west-bengal/articleshow/69362769.cms>

<sup>125</sup> "Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal at public meeting for Lok Sabha Election in Malviya Nagar," *Aam Aadmi Party*, March 25, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_hugqh\\_IQ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_hugqh_IQ8)

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 2019

work hard for you.” And then he directs his attack on PM Modi.<sup>127</sup> Kejriwal makes a contrast between the intent of the Modi-led BJP government at the Centre and his AAP government in Delhi. “Modi ji said that you have given him so much votes in the 2014 Lok elections that made his 56 inches chest. But I am telling you that your own AAP government in Delhi has done so much work in Delhi in the last 5 years that we have made the chest of every citizen of Delhi big due to pride.”<sup>128</sup> Kejriwal, in all his addresses, calls his government as Delhi people’s own government.<sup>129</sup> He calls himself Delhi people’s son who rose to fame in politics only because the people have elected him.<sup>130</sup> He also attributes the work done by AAP government as achievements of the people of Delhi and a miracle which happened only with the cooperation of the people. He claims he has no credit in all the achievements of his government. All credit belongs to the people of Delhi. Hence, he embodies a government made by his AAP party as a government which not only represents but belong to every citizen in Delhi and all development work is not only done for the Delhi people but is also done with the cooperation of Delhi people. This is Kejriwal’s unique way of making claims of participatory democracy in which every citizen is made to believe that they are the active actors and drivers of change. Also, embodying Kejriwal’s own personality with the identity of Delhi by projecting himself as ‘son of Delhi’ he attempts to consolidate a regional identity for himself as the ultimate leader, protector and architect of Delhi’s governance model.

- ***Invoking regional sentiment of Delhi***

Since Delhi is the national capital of India, it has shared administrative jurisdictions between the state government and the Centre. For major government projects of the Delhi government, clearance of the Centre-appointment Lt. Governor of Delhi is required.<sup>131</sup> Kejriwal has

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<sup>127</sup> Mallica Joshni, “Arvind Kejriwal takes aim at PM Modi: ‘Claims of 56-inch seena false’,” *The Indian Express*, February 25, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/delhi/kejriwal-takes-aim-at-pm-claims-of-56-inch-seena-false-7835177/>

<sup>128</sup> Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal at public meeting for Lok Sabha Election in Malviya Nagar,” *Aam Aadmi Party*, March 25, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_hugqh\\_IQ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_hugqh_IQ8)

<sup>129</sup> Mallica Joshi, “Arvind Kejriwal takes aim at PM Modi: ‘Claims of 56-inch seena false’,” *The Indian Express*, February 25, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/delhi/kejriwal-takes-aim-at-pm-claims-of-56-inch-seena-false-7835177/>

<sup>130</sup> “Unlike BJP, Delhi sees people from Haryana, UP as family, says Kejriwal,” *Business Standard*, January 31, 2020, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/people-from-hry-up-might-be-outsiders-for-bjp-but-family-for-delhi-people-kejriwal-120013100539\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/people-from-hry-up-might-be-outsiders-for-bjp-but-family-for-delhi-people-kejriwal-120013100539_1.html)

<sup>131</sup> “Under overlords: On Centre-Delhi government relations,” *The Hindu*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/%E2%80%8Bunder-overlords-on-centre-delhi-government-relations/article68497296.ece>

relentlessly campaigned to make the people of this administrative limitation of his state government in Delhi. He launched scathing attack on the Modi-led BJP government for obstructing the unprecedented government work undertaken by his Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi. Kejriwal complained to the people regarding this in a rally where he pitched Modi-led Centre against the interest of Delhi people and Delhi's development."<sup>132</sup> "The BJP and the PM is obstructing every work that we do. They are sitting on all the government files. Our ministers, Satyendar Jain and Manish Sisodia sat on a hunger strike for 10 days in Lt. Governor's residence to get the proposal of installing CCTV cameras in every locality in Delhi passed."<sup>133</sup> He further accused the LG and the Centre of sitting with the file for 3 years; delaying the crucial task of installing CCTV cameras for the safety of women in Delhi.

He reinforces the unjust constitutional limitation on the government of Delhi by pandering to the sentiment of the people as proud residents of Delhi and calls for the demand of full statehood for Delhi. Kejriwal raised questions to invoke the regional pride of the Delhiites. "In Delhi, we have to go to the Centre for permission for all our work, but all other states in India don't need permission. Why is this discrimination against Delhi? They (BJP and Centre) say because Delhi is a half state. Why is it half state? So, make Delhi a full state. When other states have got full statehood then what is the fault of Delhi people? Aren't they nationalistic and patriotic enough? In order to amplify the quantum of injustice being meted out to Delhi despite paying high taxes, Kejriwal informed his gathering that "They (Centre) take most high taxes from Delhi, all their expenses are met by you. Their (Central government) ministers use cars from your taxes. Centre takes 1.5 lakh crore tax from the Delhi people and they spend around only 300 crores for the People of Delhi."<sup>134</sup> Kejriwal very tactically links this administrative limitation of the Delhi government with the issue of political discrimination against the people of Delhi, giving it an emotive angle of relegating Delhi people as half or inadequate citizens.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ashutosh Mishra, "How dare BJP seek vote when they did nothing for Delhi: Arvind Kejriwal," *India Today*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/assembly/story/arvind-kejriwal-aam-aadmi-party-prime-minister-narendra-modi-bjp-did-nothing-delhi-votes-2660069-2025-01-05>

<sup>133</sup> "Fasting Delhi deputy CM Manish Sisodia taken to hospital," *India Today*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/fasting-delhi-deputy-cm-manish-sisodia-taken-to-hospital-1263130-2018-06-18>

<sup>134</sup> Neha Lalchandani, "Delhi angry over half-citizen status," *Times of India*, August 16, 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/delhi-angry-over-half-citizen-status-says-cm-kejriwal/articleshow/53713551.cms>

<sup>135</sup> "Delhi gets little funds from Centre despite paying huge taxes: Kejriwal," *Business Standard*, 25 March, 2019, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/delhi-gets-little-funds-from-centre-despite-paying-huge-taxes-kejriwal-119032500003\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/delhi-gets-little-funds-from-centre-despite-paying-huge-taxes-kejriwal-119032500003_1.html)

Kejriwal reminds his audience that “BR Ambedkar has said that one person is entitled to one vote. But the vote of Delhi people is reduced to half vote due to the half-statehood status of Delhi. He hinted that such constitutional limitation is giving limited popular sovereignty to the people of Delhi. He then absolved his responsibilities as he is a victim of such circumstances. “I tried to do everything responsibilities that to give you, but there are few other issues where we (state government) can’t do without their permission.” Raising the pitch against the BJP’s Central government who controls the law and order in Delhi he said that Delhi’s law and order is in jeopardy, crimes against women are rampant and every locality is witnessing the selling of illicit drugs. He further asks why the people of Delhi need to face the humiliation of Delhi being called the rape capital of India.

Pointing out to the non-cooperating governmental machinery of Delhi which are controlled by the Centre, he accuses the Police of not paying heed to the problems of the common people; they also do not listen to AAP MLAs or pay heed to Kejriwal because the police is under not him. But the police are under PM Modi. He asks the crowd would have to go to PM Modi with their complain during distress. Pointing out to the inaccessibility of a PM by reminding the people that “he doesn’t meet with me despite my efforts in the last few years, leave alone the possibility of meeting you. With a clarion call for fighting tooth and nail for the full statehood of Delhi, he points put how Delhi people are being deprived of their own rights due to the heavy flow of people from different parts of the country in the national capital for studies and employment.

He pointed out that in Delhi, now even if the children get high scores, parents in Delhi are not happy because most college admission seats are taken by students of other states. He has exercised caution to clarifying that “we are not against students of other states. But Delhi students will also need to study somewhere. Don’t you think 85 percent seats of Delhi colleges should be for Delhi students? I promise to make 200 colleges in 2 years if Delhi becomes full state. In order to gauge the mood of his audience and to take their opinion to make them feel important, Kejriwal occasionally in between his speeches he asked to his audience. “I am not saying something wrong, isn’t it?” He promised to make cheap and low interest pucca houses if Delhi becomes full state. For all Delhi youth he has promised to create more jobs. He reminded the people of Delhi about PM Modi’s unfulfilled promise of full statehood to Delhi which he assured if BJP gets 7 MPs in the last election. Kejriwal sarcastically asks the people, “You gave them 7 MPs, did they give you full statehood? What did you get by making him PM? He only destroyed the economy, closed your businesses. Did he make a single road for

you? Did he give admission to your children in schools? Then Kejriwal cites examples of other regional parties who gets support from the people even in the national level Lok Sabha elections. Like Bengal votes for Mamata *didi* in Lok Sabha, Tamil Nadu votes for DMK, you should vote for AAP in Lok Sabha because AAP is your own party, Delhi's own party. He strongly cautioned the people that Congress and BJP don't care about you. Whatever we could do in our capacity for your development, we have done. Now we have to all strive, fight and lay down our lives for full statehood like the people of Telangana, you give me all seven MPs, I will snatch statehood from the Centre.<sup>136</sup>

- ***Emphasis on 'Delhi Model of Governance'***

The most dominant theme in Kejriwal's speeches has been the emphasis on his Delhi model of governance which he claims to be a historic revolutionary model of providing free and good quality services to common citizens. These services include free electricity, free water, good quality treatment in government health centres and good quality government schools. He repeatedly informs the people about his government schemes like free bus transport for women and free pilgrimage trips for elderly. In every rally, after listing out the superior and exceptional quality of public services rolled out by his government, he compares them with the services of Modi-led Centre as BJP is his principal opposition party in Delhi. In one of the rallies, he made a plain comparison between the quality of services delivered by State government and Central government. Kejriwal said, "There are two kinds of hospitals in Delhi- one is AAP government's (your own) hospital where everything is free. On the other hand, the hospitals in Delhi which are controlled by Modi-led Central government, you are charged for treatment and medicines. He further claimed that his state government has ensured that even if the treatment costs 10 lakh, it would be free of cost for the people of Delhi."

Glorifying the governance model of Delhi, he emphasised that there is no other place in the world, where electricity is free, we are making roads in *kachcha* (unauthorised) colonies along with building water pipelines. He linked his government's efficient welfare delivery with his honesty. He explained that governments belonging to other parties could not match the performance of his government because other parties are busy filling their own coffers." When he makes any new promise of more government services, he ensures that his claims are taken seriously. In one rally, he said that "you are thinking Kejriwal is making big empty claims

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<sup>136</sup> "Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal at public meeting for Lok Sabha Election in Malviya Nagar, *Aam Aadmi Party*, March 25, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_hugqh\\_IQ8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_hugqh_IQ8)

today. But remember, I am an educated person so I come to make promises only after full planning.” Then, he burnishes his ‘educated background’ card to claim that he stands apart as an educated politician. It is also a jibe at PM Modi whom Kejriwal has accused of furnishing false education degree.<sup>137</sup>

In all his political communication to the people, he tells the people the uniqueness of his government schemes and the manner in which it is being recognised by everyone. He said in one rally, “Today even the opposition parties appreciate the revolutionary work that is done in the domain of electricity, water, health and education by our government.” He then asks validation for his work from the audience. “If you agree, raise your hands. Many parties have stayed in power for 15-20 years but didn’t do any work.” He also emphasises the need for full statehood for Delhi for him to do more work. He constantly emphasises that unless Delhi becomes full state, many other works are pending which his government is unable to do. He also makes the appeal dramatic by saying that he and his party is ready to even die for Delhi and its betterment.<sup>138</sup>

- ***Promise of ‘new politics’***

As his government occupied power in Delhi for full tenure since 2015<sup>139</sup>, he vigorously campaigned for his governmental innovations like *Mohalla* clinic, free bus ride, free electricity, reducing pollution, formalising colonies, and slums. But Kejriwal’s agenda of governance is not limited to showing the good work done by his government. Kejriwal claimed that his politics solely on crucial issues of civic governance and accountability has compelled other parties to give up their traditional divisive politics or caste and religion and also talk about promises of development, ushering in a ‘new politics’ in the country.

For this revolutionary change in Indian politics that he claimed, he credits the people of Delhi. “You, by voting for AAP government, have made development the agenda of elections and every traditional party which talked about caste and religion in politics before are now compelled to talk about schools and issues of development.” He also claimed that his

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 2019

<sup>138</sup> “Speech of CM Sh. Arvind Kejriwal at inaugural function of development works at Shahdara,” *Aam Aadmi Party*, March 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCCoGgPBF5Y>

<sup>139</sup> Kejriwal formed his first government in 2013 in Delhi with outside support from Congress party but resigned after 49 days due to differences with Congress. AAP stormed to power with a thumping majority in 2015 Delhi State elections.

outstanding pitch for development for all is endearing him even to the supporters of other parties who are also realising the merits of his development model. He narrates the story to substantiate this. He said, “An RSS supporter came to me saying that I will vote for you this time as you have completely improved the condition of the school in which my child studies.” So, Kejriwal makes constant attempt to also reach out to the Congress and BJP supporters solely from his ‘good governance’ claims in order to expand his support base in Delhi. From a rally in 2020 assembly election, he made a strong attempt to woo all voters for the sake of Delhi’s development. “I have promised governance in Delhi for all, those who have voted for me as well as those who have not voted for me. I have never discriminated against anyone in providing developments.

I don’t ask them (BJP and Congress supporters) to leave their party but at least this time they should vote for the *Jharoo* symbol (AAP’s party symbol) so that the developmental infrastructure that we have made with so much pain and hard work doesn’t get destroyed. They should vote for AAP for the sake of Delhi, not for me.”<sup>140</sup> He repeatedly insisted that his ‘new politics’ which has for the first time involved a team of educated people and talked about basic issues of real governance- controlling pollution, deploying Marshalls for women safety in buses and in every locality” is transformational.<sup>141</sup> He says that both the traditional parties, the Congress and BJP, are not working for the people and only acts at the behest of vested interests and big corporate like Adani and Ambani. He proudly claims that only he had the guts to file an FIR against the richest man of the country, Mukesh Ambani, for unfairly increasing electricity rates, at the cost of the common people during his first stint as CM. He further accused that since he dared to act against the elite rich who is friends of parties like Congress and BJP, they conspired to overthrow his first government in Delhi (formed with Congress government) who wanted to work for common people against the elite interests.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> “Delhi Polls 2020: CM Arvind Kejriwal Addresses Rally in Gandhinagar,” *The Quint*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfTW1rxYkWI>

<sup>141</sup> Nikhil B Babu, “Delhi Assembly elections 2020: ‘Kejriwal Ka Guarantee Card’ promises pollution-free,” *The Hindu*, November 28, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/delhi-assembly/delhi-assembly-elections-2020-kejriwal-ka-guarantee-card-promises-pollution-free-city/article61642765.ece>

<sup>142</sup> “Arvind Kejriwal Addressing in Varanasi (Part 1),” *Aam Aadmi Party*, April 17, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1d2si6zv\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1d2si6zv_c)

**Populist attributes in political communication**

The political communication of the three leaders reveals that certain populist traits loom large in their political messaging to their people. First, the anti-elite claims for all the three leaders remain a recurring theme. However, the substance of it varies from one personality to another. For Modi, his claims are largely centred on his humble background and ascetic life. For Mamata, it's her ordinary background, political struggles and plebian performative traits that creates her main plank for political mobilisation and outreach. For Kejriwal, it is his hope of providing a new discourse of clean and accountable politics in the country as an educated middle class 'outsider' who entered politics by repudiating his comfortable civil services job.

Second, the leaders have their own aggressive, emotive and emphatic ways of making varied representation claims to their 'people.' Modi reaches out to multiple constituencies- Hindus, nationalists, poor and backward communities, educated middle-class amongst others. Mamata makes a strong pitch for representing Bengal's interests, well-being and culture along with making categorical outreach to women, poor and youth. Kejriwal makes a strong pitch for Delhi governance model through which he appeals to the urban poor and lower-middle class coupled with sub-national identity-based push for greater powers and full statehood for Delhi. His promise of 'clean' politics has also been a dominant theme of his political messaging.

Third, all three leaders, as incumbents in government, personifies the claims of 'genuine' representation as well as 'spectacular governance' as the sole face of their party, building their personality cult. Hence, three major elements of the populist discourse have been dominantly traced in the political communication of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal.

**CHAPTER 4: POPULIST POLITICAL  
COMMUNICATION DURING CRISIS: A  
CASE STUDY OF THE COVID-19  
PERIOD**

Populism literature posits that populist leaders across the world often takes advantage of moments of socio-cultural and economic churning in the society to tap into the public discontent and assure immediate redemption from all problems, rising amidst ‘crisis politics.’ It is during the moments of socio-politico-economic conjunctures that the populist political forces make tall claims of ‘efficient’ solutions driven by the ‘strong and decisive’ leader for resolving the intractable crisis. One such major contingent hour of life and livelihood crisis has unfolded due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic un the year 2020. In order to capture the populist political response of the three leaders in our study to the COVID-19 crisis, the political messaging of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal during the pandemic needs to be looked at. In this context, this chapter would analyse the nature of political communication both at the national as well as the state level during COVID-19 by these three leaders keeping the federal political dynamics in the framework.

The chapter would study the nature of political communication of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the national level and the political messaging of chief ministers of two select states, Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi and Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal. Notably both states were among the high COVID-19 infection rate states in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. The previous chapter looked at the political communication of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal during elections and on issues of everyday governance. But this study on COVID-19 pandemic would give us an window to analyse how these populist leaders communicate and sustain their public appeal amidst a unprecedented governance challenge like COVID-19. This chapter is an in-depth case study to understand the crisis political communication by these leaders and it categorically focuses on the populist elements in it, apart from the regular political communication that has been studied in the previous chapter.<sup>1</sup>

It has been well established in the broad spectrum of literature discussed in the introductory chapter that populism emanates from a deep-rooted crisis of representation and unfulfillment

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<sup>1</sup> A substantial part of this chapter is published as a book chapter in October 2024. The details of the publication is provided below.

Ambar Kumar Ghosh, “Populist Political Communication in India during COVID-19: A Comparative Study of National and Regional Political Leadership’s Messaging in Response to the Pandemic,” In *Perspectives Asia Pacific: Navigating Changes in Society, Culture, Gender and Polity*, (eds) Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Motilal Banarsidass Publications: New Delhi, 2025: 297-316

The chapter had been presented as a paper in the 11th International Conference of Indian Association for Asian and Pacific Studies on “Asia- Pacific from Past to Present: Bonding and Challenges” held on 17 - 18 November 2022 at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand in collaboration with Asean Studies Centre, Chulalongkorn University.

of popular aspirations despite the copious promises of emancipatory popular sovereignty in an electoral democracy. The genius of populism lies in a fluid creation and invocation of a category ‘the people’ as a political subject especially in a situation that is perceived as a political, socio-economic or cultural ‘crisis’ of democracy.<sup>2</sup> Populism identifies the will of ‘the people’ with justice and morality, according legitimacy to its cause.<sup>3</sup> So, it constitutes a set of ethical political actions taken during a ‘crisis politics’ which requires ‘redemptive’ measures for the quick relief and emancipation of the people besieged by the crisis. As the unprecedented crisis, real or constructed, threatens normal life of the society, a departure from ‘routine politics’ of ‘pragmatic’ incrementalism in institutional democracies is required.<sup>4</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic as a sudden and unforeseen crisis that has had far-reaching and overarching implications on human lives across the globe, created a window for the consolidation and legitimization of populist politics.

As the pandemic grappled the whole world with uncertainty, fear, massive health and socio-economic crisis, many countries witnessed the consolidation of populist leaders aggregating power in their hands to ‘salvage’ the crisis situation of COVID-19 as the ‘savior’.<sup>5</sup> However, COVID-19 pandemic also offers a tricky and challenging dilemma for the populist leaders, as during ordinary conditions, their lofty-sounding emotive claims of true representation and abstract emancipation, galvanizes the public imagination. But, during a health and life crisis like COVID-19 pandemic in which state capacities and governance infrastructure reached near-collapse like situation, populists had the immediate public obligation to rise above the crisis to provide governance and crucial health and livelihood services to their constituencies. Such challenging times makes it all the more relevant for us to focus on populist leadership communication during such a crisis in order to assess the redemptive potential of the populist leaders when they are pushed into real governmental challenges.

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<sup>2</sup> Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Murray Hausknecht, "Populism as Bogey-Man," *Dissent Magazine*, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/populism-bogey-man/>.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Brett Meyer, "Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders' Responses to Covid-19," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, August 20, 2020, <https://www.institute.global/insights/politics-and-governance/pandemic-populism-analysis-populist-leaders-responses-covid-19>

India, with a high population density and complex and diverse federal electoral democracy, becomes an extremely important laboratory to understand the democratic leadership's response in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Whether the political leaders deployed populist tools to confront the challenges of the pandemic, needs to be investigated. Also, what kind of populist repertoire did they use during this crisis period and how is it different from their populist appeal in ordinary times, is another aspect that needs careful attention. Moreover, how do Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal- populist leaders who functioned in different levels of government (Modi at national level, Mamata and Kejriwal at state-level), made their appeals as administrators in government, is crucial. These leaders also acted with different sets of administrative powers, legal mandate and resources. So, the differences and convergences in their populist appeal during a crisis like COVID-19 would also be very important to register. History bears credence to the fact that Indian democracy and competitive electoral politics gave rise to 'strong' leaders with charismatic personality cults both at the national as well as state level who are often categorized as populists.<sup>7</sup>

Such leaders emerged at different points in time and shaped their popular appeal with populist attributes which were in tandem with the conditions and requirements of the political context in which they operated. The COVID-19 pandemic offers the scholars of populism to understand the nature, forms and levels of populist political messaging in India within a unique and unforeseen socio-political context like COVID-19 pandemic. Unmediated communication between the leader and 'the people' by subverting the institutional bulwarks of democracy like legislature, political party's organizational arrangements, governmental hierarchy and federal structure, is one of the key elements of populist leadership's communication style.<sup>8</sup> The outbreak of COVID-19 compelled the closure or disrupted the functioning of these key democratic institutions, at least in the initial period of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Proma Raychaudhury, "Narendra Modi: India's Vulnerable Strongman Populist Leader," *The Loop*, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/narendra-modi-indias-vulnerable-strongman-populist-leader/>.

<sup>7</sup> Nissim Mannathukkaren, "The Emotional Burdens of a Personality Cult," *The India Forum*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/politics/emotional-burdens-personality-cult>.

<sup>8</sup>Christophe Jaffrelot and Louis Tillin, "Populism in India," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

<sup>9</sup>Proma Ray Chaudhury, "The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India," *Politics and Gender*, Volume 18, Issue 4, September 2021

This left the political and governance landscape entirely to the populist political leader as head of the government to offer services as well as guidance to the people who were paranoid and impacted by the cruel repercussions of the pandemic. In this context, this chapter looks at the case study of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal to understand their populist appeal as head of governments during the pandemic. First, the chapter would assess whether the national and state leadership's political messaging during the pandemic facilitated unmediated political communication between the leader and 'the people' by overshadowing the institutions of democracy. Second, this chapter would seek to understand whether such a political communication led to centralization of power by the Central as well as state governments and how did it impact the federal structure and politics during the pandemic. Lastly, the chapter would assess whether the 'crisis' communication of these leaders also coincides with their usual populist and polarized political constructs like "virtuous homogenous people" and the "corrupt and debilitating other" or "enemy" as part of their war-like rhetoric to fight against the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, how does populist political appeal impact governmental accountability during a crisis will be delved into in this chapter.

### **Crisis as an impetus for populist politics**

Creating a narrative of crisis, erosion, threat, wrongdoing forms the premise for an 'extraordinary' populist leadership appeal to offer redemption for gaining legitimacy amongst the public. Populism captures a condition that apparently demands revulsion of conventional mainstream discourse of 'debilitating' institutional democratic politics that is accused of embodying moral erosion and corruption and incompetency.<sup>11</sup> Hence, it purportedly embarks on a path to build a populist movement by mobilising a considerable section of populace. Populists demand this public support for eliciting electoral dominance and popular legitimacy for creating a superior political discourse which can douse the imminent crisis and transform the system into an efficient order that will restore discipline and tranquility in the society and offer true representation of the 'people' in the political system. So, populism as a redemptive political project emerges with the claim to offer a corrective to the depravations of

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<sup>10</sup>Lukasz Kremky, "Populists Have Attacked Pluralism. It's Time to Restore Democratic Public Debate," *LSE Government Blog*, December 7, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/government/2020/12/07/populists-have-attacked-pluralism-its-time-to-restore-democratic-public-debate/>.

<sup>11</sup>Gregor Fitz, Jurgen Mackert, and Bryan S. Turner, *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy: Volume 3: Migration, Gender and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2019).

representative democracy.<sup>12</sup> However, populism as seemingly cathartic political project to refurbish the ideals of truly representative and participatory democracy is itself perceived by its critics as a ‘potential usurper’ of the vestiges of liberal democratic institutions and processes.<sup>13</sup> This is the point of contradiction between what the populist political discourse claims to be and actually delivers in the cause of popular sovereignty within the framework of constitutional democracy.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup>Even, in the context of populist leaders’ conduct during the COVID-19 pandemic, many populist administrators have been accused for further centralization power and aggravating inefficiency in government.<sup>16</sup>

Though duplicity and power aggregation are not unique to the populist political project and is a commonly practiced fallacy in politics, often witnessed in all forms of political life, populist resort to tactical manipulation of the masses by fanning emotive grievances has deep impact over the foundation of democratic system in significant ways. First, populism’s creation of the ‘people’ and the ‘other’, many a times, paves the way for political polarisation and social disharmony leading to majoritarianism intolerance in multi-cultural and diverse societies.<sup>17</sup> Second, populist political appeal’s tendency of creating a homogenous and unified definition of people whom it considers as its target social base for getting political support undermines the existence of pluralism in democratic discourses. The populist leadership asserts itself as a sole embodiment of the interest of ‘the people’ and not only demonizes the political opponents as ‘enemy’ of the nation and but seeks to delegitimize the citizens outside its support base as the ‘threatening’ other. Third, the populist political appeal accords foremost importance to the popular elections as the ultimate marker of legitimacy in a democracy and systematically suppresses the institutions, procedures and rule of law that constitutes the bulwark of constitutional democracy.<sup>18</sup> Fourth, it creates a perennial condition of a mythical moral war

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<sup>12</sup> Francisco Panizza, ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005)

<sup>13</sup> Jan Werner Müller, *What is Populism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016)

<sup>14</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005)

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Liddiard, "Is Populism Really a Problem for Democracy?" Wilson Center, August 23, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/populism-really-problem-for-democracy>.

<sup>16</sup> David A. Schmitt, "Populism in Contemporary Democracy" (PhD dissertation, University of Sydney, 2017), <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/18429>

<sup>17</sup> Kurt Weyland, "Populism as a Political Strategy: An Approach’s Enduring — and Increasing — Advantages," *Political Studies* 69, no. 2

<sup>18</sup> Annika Werner and Heiko Giebler, "Do Populists Represent? Theoretical Considerations on How Populist Parties (Might) Enact their Representative Function," *Representation: Journal of Representative Democracy* 55, no. 4 (2019): 379-392, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2019.1643776>

against the ‘other’ for the salvation of ‘the people’ and the nation led by the charismatic leader. Such polarised political environment driven by sycophancy towards the embodied sovereign, the ‘all-powerful’ populist leader, enervates democratic space for open debate, expression and consultation for negotiation of differences. Charismatic and dramatic emotive communication from the leader to its people can create an ignorant ‘audience democracy’ in populist political regimes.<sup>19</sup> Fifth, the distribution of material goods by the leader to its people seen as an important element of populism often enables a culture of mass clientelism where people get extremely dependent on the populist regimes squandering human enterprise and agency.<sup>20</sup> These key attributes of populism makes it a potent political weapon for fomenting further political polarization, institutional subversion and public manipulation through tokenistic gestures and patronage propaganda during a pandemic situation.

### **Dealing Pandemic through Populist Political Strategy**

Populism scholars have given great attention to the forms of populist political appeals which are emerging in democracies across the world. As discussed in the introductory chapter, populism has been conceptualized as an ideational, politico-strategic as well as socio-cultural approaches.<sup>21</sup> As COVID-19 situation offers a unique governance challenge for the administrators across the globe, leaders with populist tendencies might find it appealing to make use of populism as a political strategy to garner mass support for battling the crisis or to evade governmental accountability. Many a time, populism emerges and thrives in a socio-economic and political condition of ‘crisis’ that makes it suitable for a personalistic leader to seek support and exercise governmental power based on direct and unmediated support from unorganized ‘disgruntled’ followers. As the populist political culture recognizes the phenomenon as a ‘thin-centered ideology’ or ‘empty signifier’ without any definite concrete doctrinaire, the chaos and confusion of the pandemic gave populist leaders greater leeway to identify the ‘people’ who they want to protect against the pandemic and create the ‘other’ whom the populist want to blame for spreading of the pandemic<sup>22</sup> So, the populist political style can be structured in any particular way to ensure the representation of whatever political content it seeks to articulate, especially in a crisis like COVID-19. The political communication

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Arditi, *Populism, or, Politics at the Edges of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2007)

<sup>20</sup> Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, "Populism versus Democracy," *Political Studies* 55 (2007): 405–424

<sup>21</sup> Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

<sup>22</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *The Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005)

between the populist political leader and the people whom the leader considers to be its core electoral constituency, paves the way for populists to extend patronage and care to its constituency by alienating the others.

The leader can do it in three ways in the context of crisis politics. First, the leader has to create a ‘people’ as a moral and virtuous entity based on some specific socio-cultural or economic identity whose interest he claims to solely represent, whom the leader would seek to protect during the pandemic. 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, creating space for further polarization of society during the pandemic.<sup>23</sup> Second, the leader must possess the charisma to establish his emotive relationship with ‘the people’ by assuring them solace and protection in an unprecedented crisis like COVID-19. Third, as the leader is the sole custodian of the people’s interest, constant communication with the people as well as distribution of immediate relief that includes material welfare and healthcare by bypassing the institutions of democracy, is expected by their constituencies.<sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> Hence, in Indian context, populism during the pandemic can be seen as a distinctive form of political strategy to manage the paranoia and insecurities of the people and to deal with the exceptional governance challenges by constructing narratives of ‘spectacular leadership and heroism’ amidst crisis.<sup>26</sup>

As already discussed, the culture of bhakti cult and mass adulation of charismatic leaders has historically been the *modus operandi* of Indian politics, making it conducive for crafting effective populist appeal.<sup>27</sup> The existing literature on populist leadership styles in India that have highlighted three major strands of populism has a common feature of claiming to salvage a crisis situation to lead the emancipation of their people. First, Former Prime Minister and Congress leader Indira Gandhi, created her charismatic populist cult by effectively claiming to salvage the “poor and marginalized sections” against the vested interest of landed gentry,

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<sup>23</sup> Jakob Schwörer, *The Growth of Populism in the Political Mainstream: The Contagion Effect of Populist Messages on Mainstream Parties’ Communication* (Cham: Springer, 2021)

<sup>24</sup> Pavan Kumar Malreddy, "Discursing Populism: Types, Typologies, and Contexts," *Kairos: A Journal of Critical Symposium* 5, no. 1 (2020)

<sup>25</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot and Louis Tillin, "Populism in India," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Christobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Ajay Gudavarthy, *India After Modi: Populism and the Right* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Andre Beteille, *Democracy and Its Institutions* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

capitalist.<sup>28</sup> Second, the Hindutva variant of populism epitomized by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, Narendra Modi in his earlier stint as Chief Minister in Gujarat and as the Prime Minister of India since 2014 claimed to rescue the crisis-inflicted ‘marginalised Hindu majority’ from the sinister designs of the ‘pseudo-secularism elite.’<sup>29</sup> Third, the charismatic regional leaders of Tamil Nadu like Karunanidhi, MGR and Jayalathitha and T Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh followed by new regional leaders like Mamata and Kejriwal created their populist appeal on the basis of safeguarding the ethnic, linguistic and regional pride and interests mainly against the ‘hegemonic and discriminatory’ designs of the national party-led Central government.<sup>30</sup> Hence, populist appeals of all kinds, have thrived in Indian politics by manufacturing a threat and imminent crisis against which the populist leadership claims to provide protection to its people, making populism a repertoire of ‘crisis politics.’<sup>32</sup>

### **Dissecting Pandemic Populism in India**

The COVID-19 pandemic provides an ideal context for the populist ‘crisis politics’ to flourish. The outbreak of the unprecedented and unforeseen crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic that brought the entire world to a standstill has called for bold leadership in countries across the globe. The unknown nature of the crisis triggered unimaginable sense of life and livelihood insecurity amongst the people and understandably looked up to the state and its leadership for respite and guidance. Such an unconventional crisis situation made it conducive for populist leaders to consolidate and reinforce their popular appeal amongst their political constituencies.<sup>33</sup> However, to be fair, the urgency of the situation also posed a challenge for leaders across the globe, populist or otherwise, as they had to deliver material as well as emotional support to their citizens to sail through such uncertain times of unending human

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Carothers, "Populism Remixed," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/03/populism-remixed?lang=en>.

<sup>29</sup> Niraja Gopal Jayal, "Populism and Hindu Nationalism in India," *Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs*, July 6, 2021, <https://home.watson.brown.edu/news/2021-07-06/populism-and-hindu-nationalism-india>.

<sup>30</sup> Jan Zielonka, *The Populist Challenge to Democracy* (Zurich: ETH Zurich, 2011), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/138126/WP15.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Proma Ray Chaudhury, *The Political Asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female Populist Leadership in Contemporary India*

<sup>32</sup> Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta, "AAP, Kejriwal's Tryst with Hindutva: From Hanuman Chalisa to Ram Mandir," *The Quint*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/aap-kejriwals-tryst-with-hindutva-from-hanuman-chalisa-to-ram-mandir>.

<sup>33</sup> Antonio Spilimbergo, "Populism and COVID-19," *VoxEU*, Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), July 13, 2021, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/populism-and-covid-19>.

suffering<sup>34</sup>. However, amidst such an unprecedented contingency, the populist political appeal becomes crucial in such situation in three ways. First, as populism is premised upon the ‘politics of crisis’, the COVID-19 crisis that demanded the temporary suspension of all institutional forms of political communication like legislative debates, cabinet consultations, party meetings, bureaucratic deliberations, the space for the leader to occupy the centre-stage of governance and make unmediated direct appeals to the people opened up. The society looked up to the topmost leadership for guidance, motivation as well as material resources like healthcare and subsistence support during the period of lockdown and rise of COVID-19 cases especially during the ugly waves of Coronavirus infections. Such a situation enabled a condition for the leader to project himself as a savior who alone can act as the panacea for the people in distress. Second, as populism thrives on the antagonistic division of the ‘people’ and the ‘enemy outsider’, social prejudices against groups like poor, migrants, ethnic minorities could be politicised for creating the “other” as the “carriers of the virus”. Third, as the state became the ultimate arbiter and regulating mechanism for ensuring the survival and safety of the people, the patrimonial state could deliver health and economic governance as direct gift to the people from the ‘benevolent’ populist leader, further bolstering his charisma.<sup>35</sup>

Bearing such conditions in mind, it will be interesting to look at the nature of populist communication style of three political leaders in India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been perceived as the national face of India’s fight against COVID-19. CM Mamata Banerjee and CM Arvind Kejriwal are often recognized as the regional populists who are the most vocal opposition leaders who has been major political rivals of the Modi-led BJP and also harbors national political ambition. Also, it would be interesting to do a comparison between national-level and regional-level populist communication during COVID-19 and how it is shaped by India’s federal dynamics. Communication of political leaders can be categorized into two distinct forms for analysis- one is the verbal communication by referring to the speeches, interviews, press conferences and public statements of the leaders. Second, are the symbolic or performative modes of communication in which discursive analysis of leader’s countenance, gestures and appearances are taken into account. For the purpose of discourse analysis in this

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<sup>34</sup> Christian Bayerlein, Felix Boese, Gates Murshed, and Stefan Kamin, *Populism and COVID-19: How Populist Governments (Mis)Handle the Pandemic*, Kiel Working Paper 2192, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2021, [https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/-ifw/Kiel\\_Working\\_Paper/2021/KWP\\_2192\\_Bayerlein\\_Boese\\_Gates\\_Kamin\\_Murshed\\_/KWP\\_2192.pdf](https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/-ifw/Kiel_Working_Paper/2021/KWP_2192_Bayerlein_Boese_Gates_Kamin_Murshed_/KWP_2192.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Rosa Balfour, "Why Populism Can Survive the Pandemic," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 15, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/07/why-populism-can-survive-the-pandemic?lang=en&center=europe>.

chapter, both forms of communication-verbal as well as symbolic- by the select leaders will be considered.

- ***Protective Leadership: Patrimonial and Intimate***

The analysis reveals two forms of populist appeal in India during the pandemic-Patrimonial and Intimate. As COVID-19 started to manifest its presence in India from mid-March of 2020, the pandemic started becoming the focal point of topmost political leadership communication both at the Central as well as at the state level. It is important to note that despite the reports of COVID-19 outbreak in other countries since early January, India's administration didn't visibly take major tangible efforts towards it until mid-March when the virus aggravated to some extent across the world.<sup>36</sup> Though few state governments took some pre-emptive steps, it is only after mid of March that Indian political leadership both at national and state level took concerted steps towards battling the spread of COVID-19. In the initial period of the pandemic, PM Modi as the face of India's national fight against the pandemic, made periodic televised appearances in order to inform the citizens about the enormity of the crisis and motivate them to take appropriate steps to collectively fight the virus.<sup>37</sup> Modi's mode of communication had been in form of monologues taking up the role of motivating, uniting and encouraging the citizens to stay vigilant and put-up collective cooperation to fight the pandemic. In his widely viewed "Janta Curfew" speech on 19 March 2020, he applauded the people for cooperating with the government in fight against COVID-19 till then and alludes that as the people of the country always have listened to him, they should adhere to the Janata curfew by staying indoors and exercising social distancing to win the 'war' against the COVID virus.<sup>38</sup>

He harped on *Sankalp* (resolve) and *Sayiyaam* (patience) for the people to unitedly fight the pandemic. Modi's televised addresses focused on the emotive appeals to the people for mobilizing support and to embolden the collective spirit of a nation as a whole. He emphasized that it was necessary in order to navigate through the crisis and also made symbolic gesture of national unity and togetherness by paying tribute to country's health workers for their tireless

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<sup>36</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, "India Pays the Price for Acting Late on COVID-19," *The Asian Age*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.asianage.com/opinion/columnists/030420/india-pays-the-price-for-acting-late-on-covid19.html>

<sup>37</sup> Nistula Hebbar, "PM Announces 21-Day Lockdown as COVID-19 Toll Touches 10," *The Hindu*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-announces-21-day-lockdown-as-covid-19-toll-touches-10/article61958513.ece>.

<sup>38</sup> Hindustan Times, "PM Announces 21-Day Lockdown as COVID-19 Toll Touches 10," *YouTube*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aD9-Y4EHhc>.

service at that time. PM Modi appealed to the nation that “on March 22, at 5 pm stand on your doors and windows for 5 minutes and clap, ring a bell to salute people who are serving the nation tirelessly.”<sup>39</sup> Modi’s speeches harped more on the abstract ideas of national resilience and capacity for economic self-reliance (*Atmanirbhar Bharat*) while his proclamations were largely bereft of the details about the health infrastructure or government’s blueprint for fighting the pandemic.<sup>40</sup> These intricacies of governmentality of the pandemic were left to other ministers and bureaucratic in their relatively regular press briefings.<sup>41</sup> Such a mode of proselytizing unidirectional communication that laid down the broader direction and sought to offer psychological support and guidance to the ‘panic-stricken people’ can be categorized as a patrimonial leadership communication. Such a political messaging is ideally done by a ‘messiah-savior’ populist leader who is capable of transcending beyond the vagaries of everyday necessities of the crisis.

However, the strongman element in populist leadership can be demystified as India entered into more severe phases of the pandemic. Modi’s televised addresses and the Central government’s initial centralizing approach that triggered the sudden lockdown faded out subsequently as infection rates started increasing across the country. The omnipresence of the ‘savior strong leader’ was marked by withdrawal and relative stepping back as the Centre conceded major decision-making power regarding lockdowns and procurements of medical equipment to the state leadership.<sup>42</sup> During the worst COVID-19 crisis of the raging second wave in April 2021, Modi made a very short and largely precautionary and motivational televised address to the nation but was seen in the election campaign rallies in West Bengal addressing huge crowds delivering speeches in the campaign trail.<sup>43</sup> It was during this time that

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<sup>39</sup> India Today, "PM Modi Speech on Coronavirus: Thank Corona Warriors," *India Today*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-speech-on-coronavirus-thank-corona-warriors-1657591-2020-03-19>.

<sup>40</sup> News18, "With Emphasis on Self-Reliance, PM Modi Used 'Atmanirbhar' 19 Times in Economic Aid Speech," *News18*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/with-emphasis-on-self-reliance-pm-modi-used-atmanirbhar-19-times-in-economic-aid-speech-2617513.html>.

<sup>41</sup> "The Economic Stimulus Package: Details of ₹20-Lakh-Crore Package Announced by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in Five Tranches," *The Hindu*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/economic-stimulus-package-details-of-20-lakh-crore-package-announced-by-union-finance-minister-nirmala-sitharaman-in-five-tranches/article31606806.ece>.

<sup>42</sup> Centre Likely to Retain Limited Role and Allow States Have More Say After Lockdown 4.0," *The Times of India*, May 30, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/centre-likely-to-retain-limited-role-and-allow-states-have-more-say-after-lockdown-4-0/articleshow/76092370.cms>.

<sup>43</sup> Yogendra Yadav, "PM Modi’s Speech Was Short on Answers That Indians Demand of Him During Second Covid Wave," *The Print*, April 21, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/pm-modis-speech-was-short-on-answers-that-indians-demand-of-him-during-second-covid-wave/643350/>.

the country suffered from massive oxygen shortages, unavailability of hospital beds and life-saving drugs and witnessed a large number of COVID casualties during the crisis.<sup>44</sup>

**Table 1: Key words used in the COVID-19 related speeches of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal (2020-2022)**

<b>Modi</b>	<b>Mamata</b>	<b>Kejriwal</b>
Strength	Funds	Case count
Nation	Beds	Beds
Unity	Vaccines	Oxygen
War	GST	Ventilators
Request	Hospitals	Hospitals
Duty	Ventilators	Centre
Health workers	Covid deaths	Vaccines
Economy	Lockdown	Funds
Advanced countries	Guidelines	Mohalla Clinic
Achievement	Centre	Request
Atmanibhar	PM	Lockdown rules
Janta Curfew	BJP	PM
	Ration	
	Schools	

West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee, who has had carved a political distinction as a street fighter and close mass connect attempted to project a more direct communication with the people during this period. She has been seen on the roads and in the markets educating people

<sup>44</sup> Soutik Biswas, *Covid-19: How India failed to prevent a deadly second wave*, *BBC News*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56771766>.

regarding social distancing norms.<sup>45</sup> Delhi CM Kejriwal and Mamata also kept visiting hospitals to review the medical preparedness. Moreover, both Mamata and Kejriwal<sup>46</sup> along with other CMs have been found attending regular press conferences to apprise the people of their state on the status of the COVID-19 situation, revised guidelines, state's preparedness and the governmental actions being taken to control the situation.<sup>47</sup> In Mamata's case, in an unprecedented move, administrative meetings on COVID-19 were also televised and were followed by press conferences.<sup>48</sup> However, such channels of accountable communication during the crisis were accompanied by selective silence or denial of alleged suppression of COVID-19 deaths in Bengal and discrepancies in data on COVID-19 infections that has led to political scuffle with the Centre. <sup>49</sup>Delhi government's inability to fully utilize the Mohalla Clinics as pointed by the Delhi High Court met with studied silence from Delhi CM Kejriwal.<sup>50</sup>

However, the overall tendency of CMs of both states to constantly remain visible in public view and communicate about the nitty-gritty of the pandemic management creates an intimate, highly tangible and involved manner of both symbolic as well as verbal communication from the leadership for the respective states. Modi as the leader of the nation, dealt with more motivational and abstract elements of broader guidelines for the nation to stay strong and motivated the citizens amidst gloom along with showing the way for economic revival in the aftermath of pandemic devastations. Mamata and Kejriwal, as chief ministers of states who are responsible for providing healthcare in their respective provinces, dealt with basic everyday necessities of managing healthcare, public restrictions and resources. This distinction has been

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<sup>45</sup> Hindustan Times, "Didi's Lessons on Social Distancing: Mamata Banerjee Takes to Kolkata Streets to Fight COVID-19," Hindustan Times, March 30, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/didi-s-lessons-on-social-distancing-mamata-banerjee-takes-to-kolkata-streets-to-fight-covid19/story-oMNOulx2aPn1i2bbpjvwrO.html>.

<sup>46</sup> India Today, "Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal Addresses Press Conference On Covid Issues & More," YouTube video, posted by India Today, May 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csmQqb75a30>.

<sup>47</sup> India Today, "Mamata Banerjee Briefing on Coronavirus Fight After Taking Over as West Bengal CM," YouTube video, 8:37, April 27, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azMfZ4tdV5Q>.

<sup>48</sup> Times Now News, "Mamata Banerjee to Resume Her District Administrative Meetings from Monday, First Since COVID Outbreak," July 12, 2020, <https://www.timesnownews.com/kolkata/article/mamata-banerjee-to-resume-her-district-administrative-meetings-from-monday-first-since-covid-outbreak/640673>.

<sup>49</sup> NDTV, "After Row With Centre, Mamata Banerjee Unblocks COVID-19 Inspection Team," April 21, 2020, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-row-over-centres-special-covid-19-teams-5-in-opposition-ruled-states-2215529>.

<sup>50</sup> Richa Banka, "Mohalla Clinics a Waste If Not Used During Pandemic: Delhi HC," Hindustan Times, May 5, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/mohalla-clinics-a-waste-if-not-used-during-pandemic-delhi-hc-101620166912692.html>.

captured very clearly in Table 1 which contains the key words used in the speeches of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal during the COVID-19 crisis between 2020 to 2022.

- ***Political and the Socio-cultural ‘Other’***

Typical of the populist mode of political strategy of creating a homogenous category of virtuous people in opposition to the ‘alien or enemy outsider,’ such a strategy was visible in the communication of both Modi at national level as well as Mamata and Kejriwal at the state-level during COVID-19. Such a project of otherization took place both at the political as well as socio-cultural level. At the political level, the CMs of the opposition parties like Mamata and Kejriwal, as vocal critics, have accused the Centre of vendetta politics and non-cooperation in the fight against the pandemic.<sup>51</sup> They alleged that the Centre was halting crucial funds needed by their state governments, was not appropriately distributing medical equipment including medicines and oxygen and has been slow on procurement and adequate distribution of vaccines.<sup>52</sup> In return, Modi has accused the opposition-ruled states of deliberately non-cooperating with the Centre, raising false alarm of requirement of oxygen, medicine, vaccines and unavailability of funds and deliberately spreading the virus by sending the migrant workers back to their native villages in order to embarrass the Central government.<sup>53</sup> The state governments, especially Mamata vociferously protested against the Centre’s move to send Central inspection teams to opposition-ruled states for review of COVID-19 preparedness as she apprehended that such a team has been sent with ulterior motives to belittle her efforts of fighting the pandemic and play vendetta politics.<sup>54</sup>

In the socio-cultural sphere, after the Tablighi Jamat congregation in Delhi in March 2020, the proponents of anti-Muslim rhetoric as part of Hindutva propaganda started to stigmatize Muslims as ‘Carrier of the virus’ or ‘super spreader’ triggering violence against Muslims in

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<sup>51</sup> “Bengal Spent Rs 4,000 Crore on COVID Management So Far; Got No Assistance from Centre: TMC,” *Economic Times*, November 28, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bengal-spent-rs-4000-crore-on-covid-management-so-far-got-no-assistance-from-centre-tmc/articleshow/79465492.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>52</sup> “Outright False Statements: Delhi-Centre Blame Game on Oxygen Crisis,” *NDTV*, April 25, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/outright-false-statements-delhi-centre-blame-game-on-oxygen-crisis-2421754>.

<sup>53</sup> “Opposition Fumes as PM Modi Blames Them for Covid Spread in His Lok Sabha Speech,” *India Today*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/oppn-fumes-as-pm-modi-blames-them-for-covid-spread-in-his-lok-sabha-speech-1910000-2022-02-07>.

<sup>54</sup> “Mamata Banerjee Denies Permission to Central Teams to Visit Covid-Affected Areas in West Bengal,” *India TV News*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/mamata-banerjee-denies-permission-to-central-teams-to-visit-covid-affected-areas-in-west-bengal-609500>.

many parts of the country.<sup>55</sup> Though Modi didn't personally articulate or defend these claims, his tactical silence on this issue has been palpable. This narrative coincided with the Hindutva right-wing's broader political narrative that espouses the 'otherisation' of the religious minorities.<sup>56</sup> The social ostracization was not only based on communal prejudice but also included ethno-racial attacks in the early period of the pandemic.<sup>57</sup> As the virus originated from China, there also has been incidents of harassment of Northeastern people, especially students, living in North India and other states for their facial resemblance with the Chinese nationals.<sup>58</sup> Such national-level prejudices were accompanied by sub-national jingoism as both CM Mamata and Kejriwal 'othered' the people from outside the state as potential carriers of the virus or non-natives of the state.<sup>59</sup> There was also attempts to discriminate against the non-natives in the states by depriving them of medical treatment, as attempted in Delhi.<sup>60</sup> Mamata Banerjee also allegedly dubbed the trains carrying migrant workers as 'Corona Express' in a statement alluding to explain the complete lack of COVID protocol on the part of the Centre while the migrant workers were being sent back home.<sup>61</sup>

- ***Symbolism and Populism***

As a common trait in the populist political strategy, the making of the personality cult of the leader as an 'embodied sovereign' and a leader who is both an 'infallible strongman' and benevolent savior of the people', took place during the COVID-19. All crucial announcement

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<sup>55</sup> Aneesha Mathur, "Supreme Court on Communal Reports in Media Over Tablighi Jamaat," *India Today*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/law/story/supreme-court-communal-reports-media-tablighi-jamaat-coronavirus-1848329-2021-09-02>.

<sup>56</sup> Catarina Kinnvall, "Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the Masculinization of Indian Politics," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 283-302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1588851>.

<sup>57</sup> Tina Das, "Indians Who Made COVID a Muslim Virus After Tablighi Jamaat Are Cheering Odisha's Rath Yatra," *The Print*, June 24, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/pov/indians-who-made-covid-muslim-virus-after-tablighi-jamaat-are-cheering-odishas-rath-yatra/447717/comment-page-1/>.

<sup>58</sup> Mohammad Ibrar, "Students from Northeast Complain of Racism at KMC," *Times of India*, February 11, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/students-from-northeast-complain-of-racism-at-kmc/articleshow/74071475.cms>.

<sup>59</sup> "Mamata Banerjee Blames Outsiders for Spread of Virus," *The Statesman*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.thestatesman.com/bengal/mamata-banerjee-blames-outsiders-spread-virus-1502963503.html>.

<sup>60</sup> "Delhi's Hospitals Only for Its Residents, Says Arvind Kejriwal," *The Hindu*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/delhis-hospitals-only-for-its-residents-says-arvind-kejriwal/article31771306.ece>.

<sup>61</sup> "CM Mamata Banerjee Claims People Called Trains Carrying Migrant Workers 'Corona Express,'" *Scroll.in*, June 10, 2020, <https://scroll.in/latest/964352/cm-mamata-banerjee-claims-people-called-trains-carrying-migrant-workers-corona-express>.

related to the COVID-19 pandemic starting from the lockdown announcements, crucial governmental steps, vaccines were made by the topmost leadership. The need for the leaders to be at the forefront of every policy decision related to COVID-19 was the typical ubiquity that the cult-making of populism requires. The vaccine certificates featured PM's picture on it, the fund was called PM-CARES and CM Relief funds, all welfare schemes of the Central and the state governments were carried out in the name of the leader, be it the PM or the CMs.<sup>62</sup> Hence, the need for visibility of the populist leader during a crisis a monumental as the COVID-19, was to reinforce the prerequisite of the leader to appear all-pervasive and successful in managing the crisis.<sup>63</sup> Even at the state level, similar efforts to project and attribute all governmental initiatives during the pandemic to the topmost leaders, Mamata in Bengal and Kejriwal in Delhi, have been witnessed throughout the crisis.

### **Key attributes of populist crisis communication**

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. 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. Hence, all three leaders focused on putting their own imprimatur on Covid-19 governance to reinforce their indispensability during any crisis. 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. Lastly and most importantly, the zealotry of the populist administrator to advance their performative politics of visibility and heroism have often compromised the

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<sup>62</sup> Abantika Ghosh, "Modi Image on Covid Vaccination Certificate Is Self-Projection Politics, Some Parties Cry," *ThePrint*, March 2, 2021, <https://theprint.in/india/governance/modi-image-on-covid-vaccination-certificate-is-self-projection-politics-some-parties-cry/612716/>.

<sup>63</sup> "Donation Digitized with BHIM UPI," *BHIM UPI*, <https://www.bhimupi.org.in/donation-digitized-with-bhim-upi>.

immediate administrative needs that a diffused institutional structure with a trained bureaucracy is better equipped to handle rather than personal arbitrary interventions by the highest political leadership. Hence, the imperative of swift and efficient governance, becomes the biggest casualty of populist machismo during a crisis like COVID-19. However, the visibility of the leadership also ensured, to some extent, the much-needed political accountability during a critical crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

# **CHAPTER 5: CITIZENS' PERCEPTION ON POPULIST LEADERSHIP APPEAL**

The significance of the populist political discourse lies in its ability to resonate with the people. But, analysing the nature of political communication of populist leaders reveals the dynamics of only the supply side of populism. As the measure and success of such populist appeal entirely hinges upon its acceptability amongst the people or masses, it is an imperative to also look at the demand side of populism. The centrality of the populism thesis is based on the premise of 'truly' representing the collective general will of the 'people' whom scholar Taggart has called "heartland of society."<sup>1</sup> It claims to strengthen representative democracy by prioritizing popular sovereignty of the 'pure demos' (true people) over the vested interests of the political elite represented by the embedded power establishment. As the theoretical foundation of democracy is focused on giving the power of self-determination or self-rule to the people and populism as a political appeal, wants to ostensibly push for it, it is crucial to investigate how people perceive populist appeals and responds to it. However, as populism itself remains an extremely fluid, fleeting and subjective concept, capturing the public perception around it remains challenging.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the perennial predicament of capturing the complex nuances of human emotions, feelings and thoughts related to very sensitive political, economic, and socio-cultural issues appropriately makes studying people's response to populist political discourse, a difficult task. This largely explains why major strands of populism research anchors itself on only unfolding the dynamics of populist political appeal from the leaders, leaving out how the people or masses respond to it.

### Setting the context

However, with the growing interest in populism as a compelling political phenomenon across democracies, efforts are being made to gauge the populist sentiments amongst the people. As already mentioned, without studying how and to what extent people support or believe in the elements of populist narrative furthered by the leader, it will be difficult to assess why and how populist leaders succeed in mobilizing huge sections of people for gaining electoral support. The electoral success of populist leaders across the world in the recent times makes it an imperative to understand what motivates or drives such sizeable section of people towards populist leaders and their political appeal. Acknowledging the need to understand this, quite a few country-specific studies on understanding populist attitudes in people have been

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Taggart, *Populism*, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000

<sup>2</sup> Paul Taggart, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

undertaken. An early study on measuring populist attitude at the micro-level was done in the US context 50 years ago in 1967.<sup>3</sup> Stanley undertook a more advanced study on populism through a survey in post-election scenario in Slovakia.<sup>4</sup> Elchardus and Spruyt (2012) conducted a study on populism in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium. The study posed four key questions on populism in its survey and opined that sense of “relative deprivation” and “unjust treatment” creates a proclivity towards populism and authoritarianism amongst people. Hawkins et al. (2012) provides an interesting research design with a clear definition of populism for tapping public perception on elitism and pluralism. Most importantly, it seeks not only to measure populism, but also the two main opposites: pluralism and elitism in order to fathom populist support. Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove does a data-based study in 2014 to understand the populist sentiments of the citizens in Netherlands.

The study has found that populist citizens are more inclined to vote for populist political parties and there is a stark difference between inclusionary left-wing populism and exclusivist identity-based right-wing populism.<sup>5</sup> One such study is done by Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser and Steven M. Van Hauwaert in nine European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and UK), five Latin American countries (Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Mexico), and Turkey. The study with 15 countries provides sufficiently diverse contexts (with different levels of economic development, political cultures, and political institutions) to examine the characteristics of populist citizens and their patterns of variance between and within select world regions. The study makes a crucial finding that populist citizens are not essentially against liberal democracy rather they are disillusioned with the procedural lacunae of democracy as a political system and wants to reform it. Scholars are divided on the factors those are driving people towards populism. Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel argues in their study that the populist citizens are not politically apathetic individuals, rather “they are politically attentive citizens.”<sup>6</sup> Hawkins, Riding and Mudde finds in their US-

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<sup>3</sup> Axelrod, R. (1967). The structure of public opinion on policy issues. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 31, 51-60.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley, B. (2011). Populism, nationalism, or national populism? An analysis of Slovak voting behavior at the 2010 parliamentary election. *Communist and Post Communist Studies*, 44, 257-270.

<sup>5</sup> “How Populist are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters”, (*Comparative Political Studies*, 47, 9, (2014), pp. 1324-1353

<sup>6</sup> Van Hauwaert, S.M. and S. van Kessel, “Beyond protest and discontent: a cross-national analysis of the effect of populist attitudes and issue positions on populist party support,” *European Journal of Political Research* 57(1), 2018: 68–92.

Van Hauwaert, S.M., C. Schimpf and F. Azavedo (2018), ‘Public opinion surveys: existing measures’, in K.A. Hawkins, R.E. Carlin, L. Littvay and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.), *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis*, London: Routledge.

based survey on populism amongst the citizens that “the affinity for populism in this country varies in predictable ways: it is stronger among those with lower education, somewhat more weakly associated with low income, strongly linked to identification with third parties and ideological radicalism (particularly strong conservatism), and correlates with an anti-immigrant stance.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Understanding ‘Populist citizens’**

The ‘losers of modernisation’ thesis<sup>8</sup> asserts that economic discontent bolstered by globalisation triggered widespread resentment and newer forms of representation claims in form of populism.<sup>9</sup> However, research like Remmer’s work shows that populists in Latin America emerged thriving in a scenario of improved economic development.<sup>10</sup> Also, there is no one set of universal homogenous ‘people’ who adheres to the populist political appeal. Rather, there are populisms. The socio-demographic profile that adheres to the leftist populist appeal riding on inclusionary socialist principles for the emancipation of the socio-economic underdog is very different from the supporters of exclusionary nativist right-wing populism. Hence, populist citizens are seen to be heterogenous in many ways despite sharing certain common characteristics. Also, the literature has suggested that there is an increasing need to understand the two conceptual categories of populist citizens and populist voters. A populist voter might support a populist leader and his appeal in an election due to a plethora of immediate socio-cultural and economic factors or simply due to the leader’s effective mobilizational skills or lack of alternative leadership.

However, it is the profile of a populist citizen that would determine if populist discourse have percolated within the societal makeup deep-down having long-term impact on the polity. Few tangible parameters to identify populist citizens include- whether the citizens perceive society and politics as divided on Manichean ethic of ‘corrupt elite’ and ‘pure and virtuous’ people, prioritise popular will over democratic institutions and has strong anti-elitist stance. Hence, to fathom the complex appeal of populism amongst the people, the immediate political context in

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<sup>7</sup> Riding Hawkins and Cas Mudde, “Measuring Populist Attitudes”, University of Georgia, January 2012

<sup>8</sup> R. Inglehart and P. Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*, Boston, MA, 2016, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2818659](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2818659)

<sup>9</sup> Goodhart, D. (2017), *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, London: C. Hurst & Co.

<sup>10</sup> K.L. Remmer, “The rise of leftist– populist governance in Latin America: the roots of electoral change,” *Comparative Political Studies* 45(8), 2012: 947–972.

which they support a populist is important along with their broader perceptions on politics and society as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

It becomes all the more challenging to capture the drivers and dynamics of populist appeal amongst the people in a society as diverse, complex and demographically massive as India. One notable attempt to capture populist attitude amongst the people have been done in the study called *Politics and Society* between elections done by Lokniti, CSDS and Azim Premji University. It was a larger study to understand public perception on governance, society and institutions in India which had a segment on populism in the report. The study looked at public attitude regarding populism by touching upon three aspects- popular sovereignty, the existence of a Manichean ethic and an aversion to public institutions. The results in the report gives mixed findings with 20-30 percent of the respondents showing proclivity towards populist beliefs with strong anti-elitist stance whereas majority still not entirely succumbing to populist stance.<sup>12</sup> Recently, in the context of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Chhibber's study has argued that it is not the poor but the middle class which got more drawn to Rahul Gandhi's populist appeal in the 2020 general elections.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from these limited works, there has been no systematic attempt to look at the dynamics of public response to populism. Hence this study wants to delve deep into holistically understanding the nature of the populist leadership styles of the three leaders in focus, as just harping on the supply side of the populist appeal made by political leaders would not do justice to the research endeavour. Hence, a limited yet sincere attempt to understanding how and why people respond to the appeal of the leaders like Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal, is made in this chapter. In this context, this study has undertaken a limited public survey, interviews and FGDs to understand what factors bolster public support for the populist appeal of the three leaders- Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal. As our study is categorically focussed on understanding the appeal of these three leaders, the emphasis of the investigation has been on how the people perceive the leadership of these politicians and why do they receive such sustained public support. But apart from questions on these leaders, our study has also attempted to understand the public understanding of key societal, economic and political issues those are key to the idea

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<sup>11</sup> Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Steven M. Van Hauwaert, "The populist citizen: Empirical evidence from Europe and Latin America," *European Political Science Review* (2020), 12, 1–18

<sup>12</sup> "Politics and Society between Elections," CSDS Lokniti and Azim Premji University, 2019,

<sup>13</sup> Pradeep Chhibber, "Middle-class Populism: Political Inequalities and Populist Appeal in India," *Studies in Indian Politics*, Volume 12, Issue 2, November 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23210230241289451>

of populist discourse, which be discussed in the next chapter. The public perception on the political appeal of these three leaders have been analysed in two ways. First, how the public looks at the leader as a politician, his/her role in the party and instrumentality in winning elections. Second, as these leaders are in power and heading governments at national and state level, how do people see their role in government and how governance and welfare delivery made by these leaders is looked at by the public.

Before discussing the findings of the study, the social profile of the respondents in the study is to be provided here. The sample is spread across three states of West Bengal, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh and has a total size of 381 respondents. The sample has a majority section of younger respondents (75 percent of respondents are under 45 years of age) and a relative balance in terms of gender (60 percent male and 40 percent female). A sizeable section of respondents is from urban areas (65 percent) while 35 percent has been drawn from the rural regions. In terms of education, 72 percent of the respondents have completed college education while the remaining have either completed or discontinued school education. For most respondents TV is the most common medium for knowing about the news on politics. The young and middle-aged respondents are well-exposed to social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube while WhatsApp seems to have reach within the senior citizens as well.<sup>14</sup>

### **Leader's cult over party**

The most crucial and visible finding while analysing the public perception n on populist leadership has been how central the personality of the leader is in the people's understanding of politics. In the course of the study, it has been clearly revealed that the leader dominates the public imagination when the respondents decide on their political choices and opinions. Majority (83 percent) have also confided that they feel much closer to the leader than the political party whenever they think of their leadership preference. Sizeable section (49 percent) also feels that that they would have not voted in the same way if the leader of their choice wouldn't have been the leadership face of their respective parties. Coming to more focused discussion on Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal, the research has revealed that for all the three leaders, the majority of respondents (78 percent) believes that these leaders have been instrumental rather indispensable for their parties to remain in power for such a long period of

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<sup>14</sup> For the questions, please see the survey questionnaire in the annexure.

Ambar Kumar Ghosh, " Understanding Public Perception on Populist leadership and Politics in India," personal communication, November, 2024.

time. Since Modi is a national leader with a pan-India appeal, public perception on Modi have been studied in all the three states where the fieldwork for the study has been conducted.<sup>15</sup>

### **Narendra Modi: Ascetic Strongman**

In the context of national elections (2014 and 2019), most respondents (65 percent) feel that the personalized slogans on Modi used in the political campaign like '*Jeetega to Modi hi, Har Har Modi, Ghar Ghar Modi, Mai bhi Chowkidar, Modi he to Mumkin he*' has helped the BJP to win both the elections with impressive performance. Though for a sizeable section (58 percent), Modi remains the most powerful leader at the national level, quite a few have come up with other names like Yoji Adityanath, Nitin Gadkari, Rajnath Singh and Priyanka Gandhi as potential alternatives. Majority (55 percent) also have expressed their belief that all key organisational decisions within the BJP are taken by PM Narendra Modi and his close associate and union minister Amit Shah. Interestingly, a youth leader of the party explained that the organisational structure of the BJP, RSS and the Sangh Parivar affiliates, also plays a crucial role in building consensus around every big decision taken by the Modi administration.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the unanimity regarding Modi's leadership is not only attributed to his charisma but also to the organisational structure of the party that ensures adequate discussion and negotiation with all stakeholders in the party to mitigate differences and create acceptability and support for the leadership. Only few (12 percent) feel that BJP President (JP Nadda) has the authority to solely take party decisions. However, a sizeable section (30 percent) also believes that party decisions are taken collectively by the party leadership. A major section (63 percent) also believes that Modi's strong hold over BJP has helped the party to get unprecedented success in elections since 2014. It seems that most respondents seem to not have much problem with the fact that party decisions are taken by few individuals. Most are rather appreciative of absolute control of the party in the hands of one 'supreme' leader as they feel that centralised control is necessary to keep 'discipline' in the party which is much needed for the party's electoral

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<sup>15</sup> In West Bengal, the survey questionnaire posed questions to the respondents on Mamata Banerjee on issues of state politics and on Modi related to issues of national politics or central government. In Delhi, the survey questionnaire posed questions to the respondents on Arvind Kejriwal on issues of state politics as well as state government and on Modi related to issues of national politics or central government. Only in Uttar Pradesh, the survey questionnaire posed questions to the respondents mainly focussed on Modi related to issues of national politics or central government because Mamata and Kejriwal are not major political players in UP. Modi's public appeal is crucial to understand as UP is a major ground for BJP's Hindutva politics and the state has emerged as a strong bastion of the BJP since 2014 Lok Sabha elections (with the exception of the 2024 Lok Sabha election setback) and BJP also is in power at the state level in UP.

<sup>16</sup> "Interview with BJP leader," New Delhi, September 14, 2023.

success.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, sizeable section of respondents (45 percent) also believes that Modi's popularity and lack of credible leadership face in the opposition has helped BJP to win successive elections in the national elections in the last one decade. This point is crucial to understand that how significantly Modi's personality cult is seen as a vote-catcher in the elections. Hence, personal charisma and not any particular government programme or promise is considered as the determining factor in the elections. However, in the context of Uttar Pradesh state elections (2017 and 2022 elections), the credit for BJP's big win against the Samajwadi Party for two consecutive times has been attributed more to the sitting CM Yogi Adityanath than Modi along with BJP's organisational strength in the state. Hence, though a sizeable section of respondents is enamoured by Modi's personal charisma and regards him as a most preferred national leader, they seem to be also mindful of the different dynamics between national and Uttar Pradesh state politics. While at national level, they regard Modi as the ultimate force behind BJP's electoral success whereas at the state-level, they have identified Yogi Adityanath as the impetus behind BJP's political success in UP. What is more important is that in both the cases, they have attributed political success to a political leader/personality and not to a governmental performance as a whole or any specific governmental programme.<sup>18</sup>

- ***Committed Nationalist***

Amongst the respondents in UP and also to some extent in Delhi, Modi has been perceived as the most popular and preferred national leader in the country. His popularity is attributed to many factors. First, he has been identified as a selfless leader who has 'left', 'sacrificed', 'given up' his personal life for the interest of the country. Modi's image as someone who has left his family and wife bolstered his public reputation as an 'ascetic.'<sup>19</sup> Many respondents felt that absence of family and children in Modi's life and without any of his family member in politics,

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<sup>17</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, September 14, 2024

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Working Professionals, Varanasi, 8 November, 2024

<sup>18</sup> Ambar Kumar Ghosh, "Understanding Public Perception on Populist leadership and Politics in India," personal communication, November, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Autorickshaw drivers, New Delhi, September 12, 2023

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by BJP Party workers, New Delhi, January 10, 2024

makes him clean and less susceptible to corruption.<sup>20</sup> As one respondent explained, “Modi doesn’t want anything for himself; he is in politics to serve the country.”<sup>21</sup> Quite a few respondents are also enchanted by his frugal and strict lifestyle as a workaholic- a leader who earnestly works ‘round the clock’ for the country with barely ‘3 hours’ of sleep at night.’ Such perception of Modi having extraordinary willpower to eschew all the worldly pleasures for a life dedicated to social service mesmerizes his supporters.<sup>22</sup> People often look up to Modi’s ‘indefatigable’ urge to serve the country often against the perception of other ‘unmotivated privileged leaders’, concluding ‘there is no alternative to Modi.’ Even people who have not demonstrated visible approbation for Modi’s politics, have confided admiration for him for being able to reach such a coveted position in life despite his extremely humble background.<sup>23</sup> Quite a few reminded that from being a ‘*chaiwala*’ (teaseller) or ‘son of a *chaiwala*’ to becoming such a powerful leader, is an extremely ‘inspiring’ and ‘extraordinary’ achievement.<sup>24</sup>

Such a perception of a struggling past and selfless life have helped Modi to create a moral authority to leadership and power.<sup>25</sup> Yet, many identified Modi as India’s son and a part of their family, especially women, demonstrating Modi’s ability to forge familial ties with the electorate through his emotional appeal.<sup>26</sup> Another visible aspect that adds to Modi’s popular appeal is his ‘nationalism plank’ or ‘nationalist appeal.’ Many respondents seemed convinced that national security is ‘safe’ in the hands of Modi. Respondents have most often mentioned ‘Pulwama attack and surgical strike of 2019’ as examples of instances when Modi gave a befitting reply to the ‘enemy’ nation Pakistan. This has created a celebratory and adulatory

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<sup>20</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by Local Residents, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, September 14, 2024

<sup>21</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by Local Residents, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, September 14, 2024

<sup>22</sup> Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by Women NGO workers, New Delhi, January 10, 2024

<sup>23</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by Working Professionals, Varanasi, November 8, 2024

“Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by University Students, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, November 5, 2024

<sup>24</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by local residents, Thakur Nagar, West Bengal, May 26, 2024

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Journalist, New Delhi, March 17, 2024

Interview with BJP leader, Varanasi, November 7, 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by local female residents, New Delhi, September 12, 2023

impression about Modi's bold leadership.<sup>27</sup> Few respondents also maintained that it is under Modi that India is receiving 'global respect.' Many respondents highlight instances of 'Modi rubbing shoulders with leaders like Putin, Obama, Trump, Xi Jinping' as examples of Modi's global stature. Developments like 'G20 India presidency, India's successful mars mission (Mangalyaan) and Lunar Mission (Chandrayaan)<sup>28</sup>, UN recognition of International Yoga Day', all are seen as manifestations of India's rising global stature under Modi.<sup>29</sup>

It is interesting to note that such is the ubiquity of Modi's impact in the public imagination, that India's all achievements, which might not be a direct handiwork or policy initiative of his government, are seen to be happening under his direction or guidance. Modi's diaspora events abroad have also left a special mark on many respondents. They see it as 'Modi being loved worldwide' as a leader of global repute. Few BJP workers, during the interaction in the fieldwork termed him as 'world's most popular leader.' Modi's perception as a 'bold leader' is etched in the minds of the respondents for taking many unprecedented decisions in government.<sup>30</sup> For instance, issues like demonetization, Ram Mandir consecration, abrogation of article 370 in Kashmir, criminalisation of Triple Talak, are dominant in public imagination. Amongst them, Ram Mandir construction and article 370 abrogation has helped the most for Modi to solidify his image as a 'bold, muscular and brave Hindu' leader and ready to safeguard them from all 'enemies.' Modi's welfare schemes like Ayushman Bharat, Ujjwala Yojna, construction of toilets in rural households, Jan Dhan Yojna seems to be popular amongst the rural women respondents. Mudra loan, Ayushman Bharat and Skill India is also popular amongst youth.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local Youth, Cooch Behar, April 15, 2024

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by BJP party workers, Cooch Behar, April 14, 2023

<sup>28</sup> Arjun Sengupta, "Remembering Mangalyaan: How ISRO's Mars Orbiter Mission was a great leap for India," *The Indian Express*, September 25, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-sci-tech/mangalyaan-mars-orbiter-mission-8954001/>

<sup>29</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by BJP Party workers, New Delhi, March 27, 2024

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, New Delhi, March 24, 2024

<sup>30</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by BJP Party workers, New Delhi, March 27, 2024

<sup>31</sup> Ambar Kumar Ghosh, "Understanding Public Perception on Populist leadership and Politics in India," personal communication, November, 2024.

- **Brand Modi across regions**

In West Bengal, Modi is relatively a more remote figure for most respondents who felt that he is 'most important leader of the BJP' and is doing good work for 'improving India's image abroad' and 'strengthening national security.'<sup>32</sup> Not many in Bengal are aware of Modi government's welfare schemes. This can be attributed to two factors. First, due to federal political conflicts between the Central government led by Modi and state government headed by Mamata, certain central schemes are not implemented in the state.<sup>33</sup> Also, the BJP state leadership have failed to popularise the schemes by Modi government in the state due to many structure challenges and limitations that the party faces in the state.<sup>34</sup> In Uttar Pradesh, the popularity of Modi and his Hindutva politics is visibly high and the role of both the state government as well as Central government is appreciated for the success of the double engine government.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the dual cause of Hindutva and development seems to contribute to the creation of the unchallenged cult around Modi in the Hindi heartland while it is moderated in Delhi. In Delhi, Modi is interestingly seen as a strong national leader by most respondents whom they seen as a 'strong' and 'deserving' PM, at the state level, preference for Kejriwal and AAP government was also visible.<sup>36</sup> As a relatively distant figure in Bengal, Modi, though known to all and supported by some sections, his political appeal seems visibly peripheral in Bengal in this study though not completely absent. Modi's reach amongst the people through his communication seems to be very high as most respondents were found to have heard Modi's

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<sup>32</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Women members of Self Help Groups (SHGs), Siliguri, West Bengal, April 16, 2023

<sup>33</sup> Romita Dutta, "The Mamata firewall against central welfare schemes," *Indian Today*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/the-mamata-firewall-against-central-welfare-schemes-1753968-2020-12-28>

<sup>34</sup> "BJP's Bengal debacle: Trapped by narrative, leadership crisis and minority consolidation," *Economic Times*, June 6, 2024,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/west-bengal/bjps-bengal-debacle-trapped-by-narrative-leadership-crisis-and-minority-consolidation/articleshow/110744157.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>35</sup> Ambar Kumar Ghosh, " Understanding Public Perception on Populist leadership and Politics in India," personal communication, November, 2024.

<sup>36</sup> "Focus Group on Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Working Professionals, New Delhi, January 12, 2024

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, New Delhi, January 11, 2024

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Autorickshaw drivers, New Delhi, September 12, 2023

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by BJP Party workers, New Delhi, January 10, 2024

speech 'quite a few times' on television. Few respondents, who listens to radio, also sometimes tunes in to his periodic radio address to the nation '*Mann ki Baat*.'<sup>37</sup> Sizeable section (41 percent) also feel Modi attends parliament quite often. Yet a sizeable section of respondents (45 percent) feel that they would like him to speak more on crucial policy issues. Interestingly, though Modi is considered to be the central pole around whose charisma and popular appeal BJP fights and wins elections, respondents feels that governmental accountability doesn't lie only with Modi. For assessing the governmental accountability, most respondents feel that the entire government should be held responsible and not only the topmost leader.

### **Mamata Banerjee: Extra 'ordinary' woman**

In the context of Mamata Banerjee in Bengal, like Modi, she is seen as indispensable for winning elections for her party, TMC. As she is the founder and supreme leader of the party, most respondents felt there is no alternative leader of her stature who can match up to her popularity.<sup>38</sup> Her strong control over the party is supported by most respondents as crucial for maintaining party discipline and ensuring electoral success for the party. Few respondents, mainly TMC party workers, explained that *didi's* (Mamata's) firm and unilateral control over the party brings synergy in understanding party's stand on key issues and makes it easier to go to the people with one clear message before the polls. They are apprehensive that too many leadership faces might create discord and confusion across the party hierarchy, ultimately hurting the political prospects of the party.<sup>39</sup> Majority respondents (76 percent) do feel that Mamata-centric slogans like '*Bangla nijer meye kei chaaye*', '*didi ke bolo*' have helped the party to win the 2021 assembly election solely riding on Mamata's personal appeal. Many respondents also highlighted that they feel BJP couldn't win the 2021 assembly election in Bengal despite best efforts because of Mamata's unchallenged popularity and BJP's lack of leadership face matching Mamata's stature in the state. Mamata's personality and her personal appeal seems to have captured people's imagination and plays a crucial role in building her popular appeal. In Bengal, her image as a street fighter seems to have more strongly captured

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<sup>37</sup> Ambar Kumar Ghosh, " Understanding Public Perception on Populist leadership and Politics in India," personal communication, November, 2024.

<sup>38</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Women members of Self Helt Groups (SHGs), Siliguri, West Bengal, April 16, 2023

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by TMC Party workers, Bidhan Nagar, North Bengal, May 8, 2023

<sup>39</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by TMC party workers, Cooch Behar, April 14, 2023

the imagination of the majority of the respondents.

- ***The 'streetfighter'***

For most respondents, Mamata is termed as a 'fighter', 'tough woman', 'one who knows how to struggle and survive amidst difficulties' and is credited for her resilience amidst all odds. Mamata's image as a strong woman leader looms large in the people's perception. Many respondents, especially her supporters and party workers, feel that she has borne the terrible brunt of the left regime's torture and humiliation as their fiercest critic as the then opposition leader.<sup>40</sup> Her party workers exhibited sympathy and respect for Mamata for having to endure the physical assaults meted out against her by the then ruling party's (Left Front regime in Bengal) henchmen several times. One respondent, a party worker, expressed great relief that Mamata could escape many assassination attempts made by 'left government' in the past but is still worried about 'didi's' safety.<sup>41</sup> Mamata's turbulent and struggling political career in which she had to bear physical and psychological attacks for taking on the mighty 'left regime' of Bengal gave Mamata a moral authority to lead and rule amongst her supporters. Her personal turbulence made her appear as someone who is a 'tough and strong' woman who can endure all hardships in life. Many respondents while describing Banerjee's appeal said about her that she is 'capable of fighting 100 men', 'equal to men', 'only woman chief minister', 'alone fought the left', 'one woman who fought the BJP machinery and Central government during 2021 elections' 'fought valiantly despite her injury'.<sup>42</sup>

Even today, as CM in office, she is seen as someone 'who is fighting against the BJP' for her 'political survival.'<sup>43</sup> Her resilience, posturing of 'masculine toughness' in traversing the violent territory of street politics to scale up the ladder, makes her image as an 'extraordinary woman' who is beyond the normal almost creating a 'superhuman status' in the eyes of her supporters. Even respondents who didn't expressly identify herself as her supporter admits

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<sup>40</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local residents, Malda, West Bengal, April 22, 2024; "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local residents, Kolkata, 22 February, 2024

<sup>41</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by TMC Party Workers, Kolkata, 23 July, 2023

<sup>42</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Working Professionals, Kolkata, January 9, 2024; "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, University of Gaur Banga, Malda, April 26, 2024

<sup>43</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local residents, Jadavpur Kolkata, May 11, 2024

giving credit to her for her remarkable political success and ability to understand the pulse of the people, instrumental for her to win elections against all odds. Mamata's rise from a poor family to be a streetfighter youth leader to rebel against her erstwhile party, Congress, and eventually creating her own party and storming it to power by vanquishing the left citadel, is appreciated as an extraordinary political career.<sup>44</sup> Many young respondents, mostly women, also lamented the fact that one of the few woman leaders at the highest echelon of Indian politics, 'get insults due to her woman identity.' For many women respondents, she is an inspiration for 'fighting patriarchy' and 'now all men bow down to her.'<sup>45</sup> Her ascent to power is seen as a moment of 'vindication' for many struggling women who faces the heat of patriarchy in their everyday battle of pursuing a life of their choice.<sup>46</sup>

- *Appeal of familiarity*

Mamata's simplicity in her daily conduct in life have also captured the attention of the respondents. Many women felt that Mamata's simple attire- *white dhanekhali saree* makes them relate with her as someone who is 'next door'. 'She is like us' said one woman respondent from a rural area.<sup>47</sup> Few also reminded that 'she still lives in a house with *taalir chaad* (thatched roof) despite being entitled to a 'luxurious government accommodation.' Some respondents also derided such gestures as 'theatrics and 'show-off' to 'emotionally fool the people.' Many respondents though talked about the lack of sophistication in her public communication as her unique style which only 'Mamata' has. Many women, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, defended Mamata in this regard. Mamata has received humble education and didn't have the privilege of learning 'proper English' or appropriate etiquette of public speaking. She had to fight her way up the political ladder.' The women explained than despite facing similar challenges 'like them' that includes 'speaking properly,' 'speaking in english', 'speaking in the language of the elite', she could make it to the top and rub shoulders with the so-called elite of

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<sup>44</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Local Residents, Malda, October 1, 2023

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local residents, Thakur Nagar, West Bengal, May 26, 2024

<sup>45</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, April 10, 2023

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, Kolkata, July 10, 2023

<sup>46</sup> Interview with TMC leader, Kolkata, West Bengal, January 6, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Women members of Self Help Groups (SHGs), Malda, West Bengal, April 16, 2023

the society.' Even we can't speak English' said a lady respondent. Yet, 'Sharukh Khan, Amitabh, Jaya Bachchan likes her very much', boosted another respondent.<sup>48</sup> Many also has mentioned about finding her frequent gaffe ups and mistakes, slip of tongue in public statements as funny but adorable. Few respondents, mostly urban educated, also expressed concerns that as a head of government and in high position she should exercise caution while speaking at public events as 'it is a matter of Bengal's reputation.'

- **Maternal care**

Mamata's personal conduct as a warm and affable person also have enamoured her amongst the party cadres. They feel that her simplicity, fighting spirit and her care, love and affection of them (for the party workers and people of Bengal) motivates them to work for the party, often in many adverse circumstances. Many party cadres and local leaders, in the course of the FDGs, shared experiences of meeting her in some party meeting 'She remembers us by names, knows names of every village and roads.' Few local leaders also recall getting direct help or call from Mamata during their 'distress and bad times.' Such humane touch that Mamata has exhibited in public life has greatly endeared her amongst a sizeable section of people including supporters and party workers. Many women in the rural areas of south Bengal recalls Mamata's visit to their locality during floods. Few said in an assuring tone that '*didi* stays with us during our bad times.'<sup>49</sup> Quite a few respondents appreciated Mamata's unique style of conducting live administrative meeting in every district in front of the camera. 'She cuts notorious officers and leaders down to size' and 'provides transparency to the governmental system.'<sup>50</sup> Other respondents further explained that due to the live telecast of such meetings, 'we get to know how governmental decisions are taken in such meetings, it's our right to know that.' They appreciate Mamata's effort to bring in transparency and also praised her hard work in visiting every district in-person at periodic intervals.<sup>51</sup> Others were not very impressed with such gestures and labelled them as show off and gimmicks; instead wants her to focus on reducing corruption in government as serious corruption charges are labelled against her party.

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<sup>48</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local women residents, Malda, West Bengal, April 23, 2024

<sup>49</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local women residents, Thakur Nagar, West Bengal, May 20, 2024

<sup>50</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local women residents, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, April 29, 2023

<sup>51</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local women residents, Kolkata, West Bengal, February 13, 2024

Interestingly, most people (53 percent) have blamed the 'local leaders and other ministers' for the allegations of corruption against Mamata Banerjee government though sizeable majority respondents (58 percent) also feel that as the leader of the party she should act against the corrupt. The insinuation remains that 'the party workers and leaders may be corrupt. But she remains untainted.' Though for many, she being aware of the actions of corruption wasn't ruled out and expects strong actions from her, most are not directly implicating her for the corruption of her ministers or party members.

- ***The magic of welfare schemes***

One aspect of governance that has endeared Banerjee to the electorate has been certain government welfare policies launched by Banerjee's government over the course of her three terms in office. Two aspects of her welfare schemes appeared to be most popular, especially amongst the women voters. One is the much-discussed and well-known cash transfer schemes which many analysts have argued to be instrumental in assuring Mamata's victory in successive elections. Schemes like *Lakshmir Bhandhar* which provides monthly allowance to women of all household seems to have gained traction amongst many women respondents, most of whom were home makers. They claimed that the allowance is not only an income for them but also a matter of dignity as the women can spend this 'little' money on their own without asking for it from their male members (earning members) of the family. Few women also took pride in the fact that it is for *didi* (Mamata) that they can think of making humble yet some contribution to the household expenses like buying vegetables, books for children or save it for Durga puja festivities.<sup>52</sup> Another scheme, *Kanyashree*, "a conditional cash transfer scheme with the aim of improving the status and well-being of the girl child in West Bengal by incentivizing schooling of all teenage girls and delaying their marriages until the age of 18, the legal age of marriage" also seems popular.<sup>53</sup> It is such a sense of empowerment and self-esteem that makes many women enchanted by Mamata and her government's welfare schemes. She could create the impression amongst her supporters that she is for the poor and not for big corporate. She has ensured that her social welfare schemes touch every aspect of a common person's life. But quite a few young boys and mothers of boys demanded *Kanyashree* like scheme for male

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<sup>52</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local women residents, Malda, West Bengal, April 23, 2024

<sup>53</sup> "Kanyashree Scheme," Government of West Bengal, [https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp\\_scheme.php#:~:text=Guidelines-About%20the%20Scheme,all%20districts%20of%20the%20State](https://www.wbkanyashree.gov.in/kp_scheme.php#:~:text=Guidelines-About%20the%20Scheme,all%20districts%20of%20the%20State).

students as well, indicating the growing demand for such cash transfers. Other initiatives of social welfare like *Yuvashree* and *Swasthya Sathi*<sup>54</sup> schemes and public grievance redressal mechanism directly in the name of Mamata '*Didi ke bolo*' gave many an assurance that Mamata is trying to listen to their problems. They understand the limitations of such efforts as one conceded 'it's not possible for her to listen to all demands but she tries.' Duare Sarkar initiative, which provided for occasional camps from government in all localities across the state during which people could get themselves enrolled for the government schemes and complete the documentation work, found support in the elderly respondents. One of them said that 'as running from pillar to post at government offices for availing government schemes is painful, setting up of such camps makes our lives easier.'<sup>55</sup> One major policy initiative which has worked in the favour of multi-pronged development of the women is the functioning of vibrant self-help groups for women by the state government. The creation of small groups of women for imparting them government-sponsored vocation training/ apprenticeship to develop some skills like stitching, harvesting, running farms, cooking mid-day meals, working in beauty parlours, gave some source of economic self-reliance to several women from lower middle-class families. One tribal women respondent explained that 'on becoming a part of the self-help group, I came out of the confines of my house, went to bank for first time for applying for a government loan to buy a sewing machine.'<sup>56</sup>

Mamata remains the personification of her party in the eyes of majority respondents. Few directly said that they feel 'she (Mamata) is the party and she is the moral force behind TMC. She should take all decisions in the party. But should consult other members.' Few party workers seemed to see her nephew Abhishek Banerjee as her successor in the future as some respondents said that 'Abhishek has the potential to succeed her but needs to learn a lot from her.' Quite a few respondents showed the urge or hope based on ethnic sentiment and 'they want to see Banerjee as PM.' Two respondents said that 'she has long experience in politics and should be PM. She should lead the opposition at the national level.' 'It is our dream to have a Bengali PM.'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Health Insurance scheme launched by the government of West Bengal in 2016.

<sup>55</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local women residents, Malda, West Bengal, April 23, 2024

<sup>56</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local residents, Kolkata, 22 February, 2024

<sup>57</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, Malda, West Bengal, April 26, 2024

### **Arvind Kejriwal: Man of everyday governance**

Similar to perception on Modi and Mamata, Arvind Kejriwal is also seen by most respondents (76 percent) in Delhi as the most important figure responsible for consecutive victories of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi. Majority respondents (56 percent) also feel that Kejriwal's strong control over AAP have helped the party to control indiscipline and internal conflicts in the party and kept the party afloat and strong to getting electoral successes since its formation one decade back. Many respondents have credited Kejriwal for building AAP and creating history by leading the party to unprecedented electoral victories immediately after the formation of the party.<sup>58</sup> One respondent commended Kejriwal for being the only leader to make it possible for a state-level party to capture power in two states (Delhi and Punjab) within a decade of its formation.<sup>59</sup>

- ***Man of difference***

Kejriwal's supporters feel his spectacular success in politics within a short span of time makes him an exceptional figure in Indian politics and he has a 'strong deserving claim to prime ministership more than any other opposition leader.'<sup>60</sup> However, other AAP leaders like Atishi, Manish Sisodia, Raghav Chadda were identified as few other leaders of AAP that they could think of apart from Kejriwal as alternatives. However, the perception has been quite dominant that Kejriwal remains the supreme leader of the party. Kejriwal's popular appeal seems to be premised upon two major factors. First, Kejriwal's image as an educated and extremely qualified middleclass man who has left the comfort of the much-coveted civil service job to devote his life to public service, created his mass appeal. As the conventional assumption holds vogue that 'good and decent' people hardly come to politics, Kejriwal gave a ray of hope that a 'good person' has come with an intention to do 'good work' in politics. Many respondents in Delhi called him 'educated good man in politics', 'he is honest', 'thinks of common man',

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"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Working Professionals, Kolkata, May 18, 2024

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by local residents, Jadavpur Kolkata, May 11, 2024

<sup>58</sup> "Focus Group on Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Working Professionals, New Delhi, January 12, 2024

<sup>59</sup> "Focus Group on Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Senior Citizens, New Delhi, January 15, 2024

<sup>60</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by AAP Party workers, New Delhi, January 10, 2024

'knows what people wants.'<sup>61</sup> Also, the fact that Kejriwal was new to politics and didn't have any prior political background or pedigree strengthened his public image as someone who is from outside the 'corrupt' system. For many young and women respondents in Delhi, Kejriwal was identified as 'clean man' and 'honest man' who was seen to be someone who could 'change the system for the better.'<sup>62</sup> Kejriwal's unique style of doing politics by staging dharnas, organizing *Mohalla Sabhas*, seeking public opinion on key issues also left behind an impression in the people. One respondent said that 'he works closely with people and makes us believe that our opinion matters in matters of governance and politics.'<sup>63</sup> Another young respondent from east Delhi explains further that 'he gives an impression that he truly represents us.'<sup>64</sup> Kejriwal's unique experiments with public outreach initiatives involving participatory democracy seems to have cut ice with many people. However, few of the respondents, mostly middle-class professionals, were not very happy with Kejriwal's politics, termed it as 'show and dramatic'.<sup>65</sup> However, Kejriwal's popular perception has been built not only on a goodwill of being an 'educated clean man in politics' or owing to rise strong association in the Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement. It goes much beyond that. Kejriwal, by certain sections, 'have been perceived as an answer to all ills of politics, someone who can 'change the political culture' and 'transform it into something positive.'<sup>66</sup>

Few young respondents, who have recently finished their graduation in Delhi, felt that Kejriwal's rise is an inspiration for them to believe that educated professionals, and not only criminals and wealthy people can also rise in politics.'<sup>67</sup> Other elderly respondents saw Kejriwal's decision to move out of the Anna Hazare Movement to form his own political party and contest elections 'as a call to make real change on ground for the sake of the country.'<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Responses received in response to the open-ended questions in the public survey in Delhi.

<sup>62</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Women NGO workers, New Delhi, January 12, 2024

<sup>63</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Autorickshaw drivers, New Delhi, September 12, 2023

<sup>64</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, New Delhi, September 12, 2023

<sup>65</sup> Responses received in response to the open-ended questions in the public survey in Delhi.

<sup>66</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Young Working Professionals, New Delhi, January 15, 2024

<sup>67</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, New Delhi, January 12, 2024

<sup>68</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Senior Citizens' Group, New Delhi, January 14, 2024

Mostly, the local leaders and party cadres of the AAP, said that 'Kejriwal was accessible and he received feedback from them.' He is also known to coordinate with the elected representatives constantly through WhatsApp groups. The impression of being close to the people, accessible and having his ears to the ground, strengthens his image as a 'simple, humble mass leader' amongst his people and party cadres, who is seen as different from the 'arrogant politicians.'<sup>69</sup>

- ***The Indispensability of Civic Governance***

If one aspect of Kejriwal's appeal comes from his image as a 'clean, educated, accessible' man in politics, another aspect that massively contributed to his popular appeal is his model of governance after he took over as the Chief Minister of Delhi. Kejriwal, on taking charge of the government in Delhi, introduced the schemes of providing free water and free electricity in every household in Delhi up to certain limit.<sup>70</sup> Over the years in government, he has expanded such services. He, with the help of other leaders like Manish Sisodia (Former Deputy CM of Delhi)<sup>71</sup> and Atishi Marlena (Present CM of Delhi), have improved the quality of government schools across Delhi<sup>72</sup> and also received recognitions due to the initiative.<sup>73</sup> Over the years, Kejriwal's main governance plank was premised on initiatives like 'free education through government schools in Delhi, free hospital care through Mohalla clinics and other government hospitals, free bus rides and Rs 1000 per month for women of Delhi, Tirth Yatra Yojana (Pilgrimage trip) for the elderly' amongst others. Such a categorical focus on issues of everyday governance have endeared him to the common people in Delhi. The awareness regarding such schemes is very high amongst most of the respondents and they are beneficiaries of it. Sizeable section of respondents felt that 'Kejriwal focusses on real governance that matters to the common man.' One respondent, a daily wage labourer explained that 'staying in

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<sup>69</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by AAP workers, New Delhi, January 12, 2024

<sup>70</sup> "After water, Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal subsidises power too, announces 50 per cent tariff reduction," *India Today*, January 1, 2014, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/arvind-kejriwal-aap-delhi-cm-power-tariff-reduction-free-water-160703-2013-12-31>

<sup>71</sup> "Sisodia the reason behind transformation of Delhi govt schools: Kejriwal," *Business Standard*, April 8, 2023, [https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/sisodia-the-reason-behind-transformation-of-delhi-govt-schools-kejriwal-123040800348\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/sisodia-the-reason-behind-transformation-of-delhi-govt-schools-kejriwal-123040800348_1.html)

<sup>72</sup> "Mission Impossible – Transforming Delhi's Government Schools," *The Impressive Times*, January 4, 2025 <https://impressivetimes.com/latest/news-3091/>

<sup>73</sup> Saswato Ray, "Inside the "Delhi Education Revolution," *Education Next*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.educationnext.org/inside-the-delhi-education-revolution/>

Delhi is extremely expensive for most of us. If we get some respite with the electricity and water bills, our lives get easier. This is only for Kejriwal.’<sup>74</sup>

Hence, the urban poor has immense regard and sense of ‘gratitude’ toward Kejriwal in Delhi. Many also highlighted ‘his good work’ on education and said that ‘now we don’t need to send our children in expensive private schools. The government schools are good enough.’<sup>75</sup> The initiative of free transport for women have also resonated with many working lower-class women as it ‘helps them to save some money.’<sup>76</sup> One AAP leader explained that these services of everyday governance provided to the people of Delhi make them realise ‘constantly’ the perks of ‘having Kejriwal’ in power. Another civil servant further explained that as ‘water, electricity, schools and health clinics are very basic and extremely crucial elements for sustenance, getting those services for free or with subsidy, leaves an indelible mark in the people.’<sup>77</sup> This sense of ‘gratitude’ has strengthened the cult of Kejriwal in Delhi.

Moreover, his focus on essential issues of everyday public services is seen by people as an extremely welcome change in Indian politics as he can deviated from the politics of caste and religion that has plagued the conventional politics discourse. One respondent gave a measured response in this regard. ‘He might have his own shortcomings, at least he is not dividing the people on caste and religion.’<sup>78</sup> As Delhi is a capital-state, not a full-fledged state and has a special status as a Union Territory (UT), many of the administrative powers are exercised by the Centre through the Lt. Governor of Delhi. This has often led to federal conflicts between the BJP-led Centre and Lt. Governor on one side and Kejriwal government on the other side. Few respondents have been sympathetic towards Kejriwal in this regard. Some of the younger sections of people in east Delhi said that ‘they don’t allow him to work’, ‘BJP is trying to stop him.’<sup>79</sup> Even, after Kejriwal’s arrest, a major reason behind getting him imprisoned was seen ‘as a ploy to halt the work of Delhi government’ in the opinion of AAP supporters and local

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<sup>74</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by Construction Labourers, New Delhi, September 12, 2023

<sup>75</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by Autorickshaw drivers, New Delhi, September 13, 2023

<sup>76</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by Women NGO Workers, New Delhi, September 12, 2023

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Bureaucrat, New Delhi, September 18, 2023.

<sup>78</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by Working Professionals, New Delhi, January 11, 2024

<sup>79</sup> “Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India,” Facilitated by University Students, New Delhi, January 11, 2024

leaders.<sup>80</sup>

The issue of Kejriwal and other AAP leaders being arrested with the allegation of the Liquor Policy scam in Delhi was also taken up with respondents in Delhi in the interviews and FGDs.<sup>81</sup> A sizeable section was of the opinion that political conspiracy to frame these leaders can't be ruled out. However, the optimism with Kejriwal's 'new and clean' politics have been noticed to have slightly dwindled in few responses, possibly due to more than one decade in office, mostly amongst middle-class professionals. One respondent said with despondency, 'he is also behaving like other politicians sometimes, getting into opportunistic alliance/understanding with traditional parties whom he once claimed to fight; not shying away from practicing soft Hindutva.'<sup>82</sup> On his arrest, there are also few sceptical voices, 'Can there is smoke without any fire?'<sup>83</sup> However, majority opinion remains that he provided governance that many other politicians failed to deliver.

### Three strands of populist 'popular' appeals

Our findings in this chapter reveals that there are certain convergences as well as divergences in the popular appeal of the three leaders-Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal. Their popular appeal is constitutive of few key populist attributes. First, the idea of creating a moral authority in the leader as the sole representative of the 'general will' is attempted, quite successfully, by all three leaders. Such moral authority emanates out of three most visible aspects. Humble background or simple living, struggling life and extraordinary capacity, remains overarching attributes that explains why people get attracted and drawn towards these leaders. However, the substantive aspects within these patterns vary from one leader to another. For Modi, his popular appeal is multi-layered and eclectic. He is seen as a political ascetic who has left his family, fought poverty and joined RSS to devote his entire life for the service to the nation. Adding to his appeal, is his long association with RSS, Sangh Parivar and the politics of

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with AAP leader, New Delhi, September 23, 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Krishnadas Rajagopal and Ishita Mishra, "Delhi Excise policy case: CBI arrests Arvind Kejriwal, gets three-day custody," *The Hindu*, June 26, 2014, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/cbi-arrests-delhi-cm-arvind-kejriwal-in-excise-scam-case/article68334999.ece>

<sup>82</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Working Professionals, New Delhi, January 11, 2024

<sup>83</sup> "Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Senior Citizens, New Delhi, October 18, 2024

"Focus Group on Perception of Political Leadership and Politics in India," Facilitated by Taxi drivers, New Delhi, October 18, 2024

Hindutva. This makes him an unchallenged Hindutva mascot, '*Hindu Hriday Samrat*' post 2002 Gujarat riots, to those who adhere to the Hindutva project. For the votaries of development and governance, he is the creator and embodiment of the Gujarat model—a euphemism for 'pro-industry', 'big corporate', 'grand infrastructure' kind of development in which all bottlenecks are dealt with iron hands. For the nationalists, he is a true strongman statesman who boldly confronts the enemy nations, foils their sinister designs with a '56 inches chest' and ensures nation's security. He also represents the country, highlights before the world its underestimated greatness and rich legacy and takes India to the highest pinnacle of world recognition, that was hitherto uninitiated by any other leadership. For the youth, he is also the leader of the 21<sup>st</sup> century who is interested in and believes to be invested in the growth of digital infrastructure and technology-led smart growth. His connect with the poor and backward castes is also equally strong on the plank of welfare and dignity. His push for financial inclusion led by women through the Jan Dhan Yojna, construction of toilets in rural households, gas connections for poor, free and subsidised ration, cash transfer for farmers, banning of triple talak to empower Muslim women are the key welfare measures which is perceived not only as Modi's efforts towards routine development but ways to accord a life of dignity to the marginalised sections. This makes Modi's populist appeal amongst the people multiple-dimensional and eclectic.

Mamata Banerjee's appeal amongst the people is premised upon two contradictory aspects. On one end, Mamata's support and popular appeal stems from her image as a struggling, battered, victimised yet resilient strong 'street fighter' leader who is protecting her turf and constituency against all odds. This is also strengthened her image as 'protector of Bengal' by virtue of being at a pole position as Bengal's tallest leader and the CM of the state. On the other end, she receives mass adulation for her caring avatar as 'didi' who provides maternal protection to her people by delivering basic material goods as welfare and ensures empowerment of the weak, especially women. Arvind Kejriwal's popular appeal is fixated on the hope of new politics, a manifestation of which the people have found in his popular governance initiatives launched in Delhi under his chief ministership. Delivery of everyday governance through subsidised electricity and water along with good schools and health clinics created his appeal as someone who addresses the daily needs of the urban poor and lower middle class. Modi, as a national leader, whose popularity has a pan-India base and have helped BJP fundamentally in winning elections since 2014, has the most multi-layered and eclectic populist appeal. Strong national identity claims of 'representing India's interest' has buttressed Modi's support base. For

Mamata, the appeal has binary dynamics with 'struggling streetfighter protecting Bengal's interest' on one hand and 'caring matriarch and provide the welfare to the needy' on the other. Lastly, Kejriwal's appeal around new politics as 'provider of everyday governance' captures the heart of his public appeal. While, leadership's appeal is shaped by voters' choices, voters' broad overview about socio-cultural and political framework of a society is extremely crucial to understand the context of popular support for leader-centric populism, which is taken up in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER 6: FRAMING THE POPULIST  
APPEAL: LEADERSHIP, CITIZENS AND  
SOCIETY**

Populist ethics or discourses have gained a widespread political appeal across countries. Populism gets exceptional traction within democratic systems. The rise of populist leaders and their emotive appeal seems to resonate with major sections of people.<sup>1</sup> A great deal of emphasis has been given to what and how populist leaders say and do in order to mobilise the people in their support. As the leadership remains the principal force and the most tangible messenger of the populist narrative, the focus has been mostly concentrated in the political communication between the leader and the people. So, what populist message the leader conveys and how do people respond to it constitutes the supply and demand sides of populism.<sup>2</sup> We have touched on both these aspects of populist communication in the previous chapters of this study. However, just looking at the supply and demand side of populism from the prism of the ‘leader’ and the ‘people’, keeps one crucial aspect outside the purview of the study.

This missing link is the societal context and the structural framework that makes it conducive for the populist ethic to emerge, blossom and thrive. In other words, what are the broader socio-political and economic beliefs and thinking of a society in which populist principles resonate so strongly? This question is extremely crucial because the communication between a leader and people or masses do not happen in a vacuum or silo. It takes place within a context, in a societal makeup, in an ecosystem within which a society’s collective conscience shapes or impacts the leader-people interaction. For instance, a socialist leader’s successful appeal to his people also depends on that society’s alignment or attachment with broader socialist principles and ideas. Unless, at least a sizeable section of society actually believes in the general salience or superiority of socialist ideas, it is less likely that the leader’s verbal claims alone can sway the masses into believing into socialism, an idea which the society otherwise wouldn’t have believed in. Hence, the importance of the foundational beliefs and ideas that shapes the dominant common sense of a society, also determines the nature of political narratives that majority sections would relate to.

### **Appropriate societal context: Prerequisite for populism**

Hence, in other words, how people feel and think about various social issues, how they look at the other communities, their understanding of the economic and political system shapes the

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<sup>1</sup> Verónica Ortiz-Ortega, “Populism and Democracy,” *Wilson Centre*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/populism-and-democracy>

<sup>2</sup> L. Guiso H. Herrera, M. Morelli T. Sonno, “Demand and Supply of Populism,” *Working Paper N. 610*, October 5, 2017, <https://igier.unibocconi.eu/sites/default/files/media/publication/610.pdf>

socio-political common sense of any given society.<sup>3</sup> To understand why a specific political narrative or discourse becomes hegemonic and gains popular legitimacy, it is not enough to just focus on what the leaders say and how the people react to it.<sup>4</sup> To what extent, the structural conditioning of the society, the general value-system, the larger collective ideas, preferences and apprehensions of the majority or sizeable section of the society, shapes the making of the political narrative, need to be investigated. The salience of political narratives and the acceptability of a leader and his message is contingent upon under what social context such narratives are formed. Even, in the context of understanding the nature of the populist communication between the leader and the people, only looking at what the populist leadership says in its communication and how well the people respond to it, is not adequate. It is important to examine if the broader societal context and collective common sense is amenable to the larger populist ideas on society, politics and economy.<sup>5</sup> This plays a very crucial role in making of a ‘populist citizen’ in a democracy.<sup>6</sup> As in the previous chapters, the populist communication between the three leaders and their constituencies i.e. ‘the people’ have been captured, this chapter tries to look beyond it. In the first section of the chapter, the populist believes of the people about the society, nation, democratic politics and institutions, welfare and economy are captured. In the second half of the chapter, the findings of the three elements studied in this research-leadership’s profile and communication, people’s perception on populist leadership appeal and collective populist ethics, are juxtaposed. These three elements are analysed together to understand why populism works effectively for these three leaders in focus and in what ways.

Coming back to the point of focus of the first half of the chapter, it is important to unpack how do we define populist ethics of the society. Populist societal ethics is comprised of populist understanding of society, culture, people, politics and economy. Drawing from the literature on populism, three broad aspects of populist societal ethics are addressed in this study. First,

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<sup>3</sup> Conover, Pamela Johnston, and Feldman, Stanley. 1984. “Group Identification, Values, and the Nature of Political Beliefs.” *American Politics Quarterly* 12 (2): 151–75.

<sup>4</sup> Converse, Philip. 2006. “The Nature of Belief Systems in the Mass Publics (1964).” *Critical Review* 18 (1–3): 1–74.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Akarca, “Three types of populism: economic, political and cultural,” *Economic Research Forum*, June 1, 2021, <https://theforum.erf.org.eg/2021/05/31/three-types-populism-economic-political-cultural/>

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Wuttke, Christian Schimpf, Harald Schoen “Populist Citizens in four European Countries: Widespread Dissatisfaction goes with Contradictory but Pro-democratic Regime Preferences,” *Swiss Political Science Review*, Volume29, Issue2, June 2023, Pages 246-257

societal perception of the ‘elite and the other.’<sup>7</sup> Second, societal perception of the politics, democracy, and institutions.<sup>8</sup> Third, societal preferences on the economy and welfare.<sup>9</sup> The questionnaire designed for the public survey on populist leadership had questions on various societal, political and developmental issues relevant to the Indian political context.<sup>10</sup> The public survey, few in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) have been conducted on these issues in the three states in India-Uttar Pradesh (UP), West Bengal, Delhi. The findings presented here based on the fieldwork might not be able to accurately capture the perception of all sections of people partly because of sampling limitations. Also, as the nature of some of these questions is extremely subjective, emotionally charged and context-specific, different sections might have perceived the questions in their own way and have responded accordingly which might sometime lead to exaggerated or underwhelming responses. However, these results are crucial to get a glimpse of the broad populist attitudes of the respondents that shapes their responses and perception towards the populist leaders.

### **Revealing the populist ideational predilections in India**

In this study, an attempt has been made to capture some of the abovementioned populist attributes and preferences of the people with regard to society, politics and welfare. As the genesis of the populist ‘strong’ leadership’s rise stems from the mass disillusionment with various institutions of democracy, public perception on institutions, elected governments and its leadership, has been studied. Few questions have been posed to the respondents in the survey and interviews in order to understand how they look at the salience of democratic institutions like opposition parties, parliamentary and legislative proceedings and the judiciary. Also, how much they regard the significance of independent judiciary vis-à-vis elected government is asked, as its very important to understand whether there is popular support for non-elected institutional bulwarks<sup>11</sup> in a democracy against authoritarian governments and leaders. Also, how the people look at the autonomy of public representatives vis-à-vis political parties, has

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<sup>7</sup> John B. Judis, “Us v Them: the birth of populism,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/13/birth-of-populism-donald-trump>

<sup>8</sup> William A. Galston, “The populist challenge to liberal democracy,” *Brookings*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-populist-challenge-to-liberal-democracy/>

<sup>9</sup> Yotam Margalit, “Economic causes of populism: Important, marginally important, or important on the margin,” *CEPR*, December 20, 2019, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/economic-causes-populism-important-marginally-important-or-important-margin>

<sup>10</sup> The survey questionnaire is attached in the annexure.

<sup>11</sup> The non-elected institutions that prevent governmental excesses and procedural violations in a democratic political system includes the Election Commission and the judiciary.

been looked at in this study. This is important to understand if the respondents understand the importance of having public representatives who can serve the people and shape policy-making on their own without strict dictats and hegemonic control of the party's centralised high-command. People's perception regarding the society have also been sought to understand their opinion on the majority and minority communities and their position in the society. As the main premise of populism is based on strong anti-elitist sentiment, knowing the public perception about the political elite and their intentions have been attempted in the study. The right-wing or cultural populism thrives on identifying the 'other' that comprises of immigrants or minorities, so opinion on the presence of minorities, migrants, refugees and 'outsiders' in India was asked for from the respondents. Lastly, their opinion on the material retribution through the state in form of public and private goods are sought in understand what the people feel about the much-discussed 'populist' welfare schemes in India rolled out by different governments.<sup>12</sup>

### **Populist discourse in India: Key findings**

Most respondents (70 percent) from the three states have reported to follow the parliamentary and legislative debates on television sometimes but not regularly. As expected, the interest in parliamentary and legislative debates is among the more educated. Few respondents seemed disillusioned with the way the legislative proceedings are conducted. They complain that "representatives often fight amongst themselves and indulges in blame game." Another respondent feels that such "parliamentary debates are high on drama and less on substance."<sup>13</sup> On the issue of whether popular policies should wait for debate and discussion in the legislature even if it causes a delay in implementation of the policy, a major section (40 percent) feels waiting for legislative approval is important but less than one-fourth of the respondents (22 percent) feel such procedure can be superseded for speedy implementation of popular policies. Many respondents gave thoughtful response to this question as they felt "if policies are made without legislative approval, there is no use of having elected representative or parliament."<sup>14</sup> Hence, the support for parliamentary process and recognition of its importance have been

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<sup>12</sup> These questions are present in the survey questionnaire created by the author for the fieldwork for this study. The Questionnaire is attached in the annexure of the thesis.

<sup>13</sup> "Perception of political leadership and politics in India," Facilitated by University Students, New Delhi, January 11, 2024

<sup>14</sup> "Perception of political leadership and politics in India," Facilitated by Working Professionals, New Delhi, January 12, 2024

visible amongst the respondents. However, the scepticism regarding legislative process found in few respondents mainly stems from their concern about the incessant delays that “derails important policy decisions.”<sup>15</sup> On the issue of legislators strictly voting on party lines, largest section of respondents (40 percent) feel that such strict party control harms freedom of legislators as individual public representatives. Most (80 percent) also feel that opposition parties must be consulted for initiating major policy decisions even if the government enjoys absolute majority in the parliament or state legislature. Some of them also explained the role and importance of opposition that “they are also elected by the people in the legislative, hence should be heard.”<sup>16</sup> Few also felt that “opposition’s feedback might help in correcting some glitches in the proposed law or make it better.”<sup>17</sup> However, there have been few voices of caution on the role of the opposition in legislative proceedings. Few observed, “opposition, many a times, creates disruption, opposes governmental policies, just for the sake of opposing it.”<sup>18</sup> There have also been few respondents who felt “opposition, sometime, behave in an obstructionist manner for political mileage against the government hurting policy decisions.”<sup>19</sup>

Overwhelming majority of the respondents (90 percent) feel that the leadership is extremely important for controlling crisis situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, once again the society’s broad idea and predilection towards having one ‘saviour leader’ as a panacea to any ‘challenging or crisis situation in society’ is quite clear. Sizeable sections (43 percent) feel that migrants and outsiders are a threat to the society’s safety and interest. Some of the respondents further explained that ‘as resources are limited for every country and India already has an ever-increasing population, undocumented migrants posed a societal burden’ despite the moral concerns for ‘helping’ displaced people.<sup>20</sup> Many respondents have expressed concerns of “migrants who secretly (illegally) crosses border and enter a country, mixes with the population

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<sup>15</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by University Students, New Delhi, January 11, 2024

<sup>16</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by University Students, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, April 10, 2023

<sup>17</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by University Students, Kolkata, July 10, 2023

<sup>18</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by Working Professionals, Varanasi, November 9, 2024

<sup>19</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by Senior Citizens, New Delhi, March 27, 2024

<sup>20</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by Working Professionals, Varanasi, November 9, 2024

without revealing their identity.”<sup>21</sup> So, the major concern about migrants seems to be two-fold. First, they create pressure on the economic resources of the host country. Second, their clandestine movement within the host country can have security implications or disrupt the socio-cultural and demographic dynamics. One-fourth respondents (24 percent) feel that the majority religious community has been undermined by previous governments in the past, around 40 percent remains undecided about it. Also, less than one-fourth of the population feels in the past, the minority religious community (22 percent) has been unduly favoured by the governments; most respondents remain undecided about it. As the rise of Hindutva led by Modi and BJP at the national level gave tremendous push to the narrative of marginalisation of or injustice to the Hindu majority of the country by the erstwhile Congress political dispensation of the past, the response to this question becomes important. The accusation of the Hindutva forces has been that the Hindu majority, despite being the majority, have been sidelined by the ‘pseudo-secular’ political elite led by the Congress party who pandered to the Muslim minorities, especially to the Muslim orthodoxy for their political interest.<sup>22</sup>

The responses reveal that though an overwhelming majority didn’t emphatically buy this narrative by directly agreeing to it, a sizeable section did. Also, most who didn’t agree to it didn’t outrightly disagree either. They remain unsure which might be indicative of the fact that they have found this narrative compelling enough to not openly refute it but might need more thinking to accept it in entirety. We can safely argue that the appeal for this narrative posited by the proponents of Hindutva politics led by BJP has some visible traction amongst the respondents. Though majority of the respondents (65 percent) feel that majority community should not have more rights than the minority, little less than one-fourth (21 percent) feels otherwise. Most respondents (67 percent) feel that the minority communities should not be seen as a threat to the society or national interest, less than a quarter (21 percent) looks at them with scepticism.

This again reveals some amount of popular approbation for the Hindutva’s political narrative of “Hindu majoritarian supremacy and minority marginalisation.”<sup>23</sup> On the question of whether

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<sup>21</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by Working Professionals, New Delhi, September 9, 2023

<sup>22</sup> Milan Vaishnav, “The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 4, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/04/the-bjp-in-power-indian-democracy-and-religious-nationalism?lang=en>

<sup>23</sup> Guillaume Delacroix, “Populism reaches new heights in Narendra Modi’s India,” *CIDOB*, January 2014, <https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/populism-reaches-new-heights-narendra-modis-india>

welfare measures that include cash transfers, free electricity, free water, free food, free healthcare, free education, free household goods are truly welfare measures or only freebies used for attracting votes, most feel (80 percent) that some are essential services and others are ‘freebies’ that can be avoided. However, there is also polarised opinion of this issue amongst the respondents. Here, the responses have been sharply divided across class lines. The urban poor in Delhi and lower classes across the rural and semi-urban regions in West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh (UP) feels that the basic social welfare measures like free ration, healthcare, electricity, water, education, some cash transfers are extremely important for their survival.<sup>24</sup> However, they also feel that ‘long-term developmental measures that would guarantee jobs to them’ is also required.<sup>25</sup> Many respondents from the lower middle class also conceded that long-term developmental measures like construction of good roads are also necessary for ‘attracting investment’ and ‘big factories.’<sup>26</sup>

However, certain sections of respondents from the middle class and upper middle-class, strongly opined that ‘such free welfare goods are only given to attract votes’ and ‘makes people lazy’ and drains the ‘economy.’<sup>27</sup> However, they feel that governmental concessions of ‘different taxes and pension schemes’ are extremely important and they are entitled to it as their rights as tax paying citizens.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that sections of the upper middle class look down upon the free or subsidised basic social welfare programmes as ‘freebies’ which is draining the exchequer. But, at the same time, they make redistributive justice demands from the government in ways that matters to them, for instance in form of higher tax concessions and pension benefits. Interestingly though many (58 percent) expressed their frustration with slow functioning of democratic and governance institutions, most feels (77 percent) that India is a democracy where concerns of various sections of people should be considered in decision making even if it delays decision. Hence, for most of our respondents, the awareness regarding the importance of building consensus in democratic decision-making, is not lost. However, the

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<sup>24</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by Autorickshaw drivers, New Delhi, September 12, 2023

<sup>25</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by Local Residents, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, November 15, 2023

<sup>26</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by Female members of Self-help Groups, North Bengal, August 11, 2023

<sup>27</sup> Ambar Kumar Ghosh, “Public Perception on Politics and Leadership Survey,” personal communication, May 15, 2023

<sup>28</sup> “Perception of political leadership and politics in India,” Facilitated by Working Professionals, Varanasi, November 8, 2024

responses regarding the salience and significance of constitutional directives vis-à-vis the mandate of elected government seems ambiguous.

Less than one-fourth of the respondents (22 percent) feel that it might be justified if elected governments act against the spirit of the constitution in special circumstances like COVID-19 as they have the popular mandate to provide governance to the people. However, in the immediately next question, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (88 percent) have reported to believe that the judiciary should intervene if the elected government acts against the constitutional guidelines as it is the 'duty of the judiciary to check the misuse of governmental power and protect the sanctity of the constitution.' The majority respondents (80 percent) also exercise strong caution by making an exception as they feel that popular demands should be prioritized over constitutional guidelines in a democracy only if the demands are extremely important for the benefit of the people. Most respondents (77 percent) felt that the ideal leader in a democracy is the one who despite commanding the support of the majority, protects the minority and few respondents went further to say that even if protecting vulnerable minority involves going against some demands of the majority, so be it.

So, it will be incorrect to say that the sizeable number of respondents in this study do not understand the importance of protecting the interests of the weak, marginalised and minorities in a democracy. Though the leader in a democracy is elected by a majority, people understand that it is the elected leader's responsibility to also protect all sections including the minority. However, less than one fourth of respondents (23 percent) also feels that an ideal leader should act according to the will of the majority. So, though the majority respondents won't mind if the leader protects the rights of the minority and marginalised but a notable section also feels that the leader should prioritise the rule of the majority. The study reveals that there is strong anti-elite sentiment as majority respondents (82 percent) feel that a strong political leader should punish the corrupt elite, political leaders are part of the elite and elites often act against national interest and the poor. In the common imagination of the public, the elite is understood as a core section of wealthy, powerful, English-speaking coterie of people that might include politicians, bureaucracy, business leaders, journalists, social activists and academicians who are embodiments of power, authority, glamour, wealth and influence. It is this group which is seen with suspicion by most common people as they are believed to be corrupt or indulges in corruption, gets access to all services and privileges in the society very quickly by virtue of their influence and proximity with power.

They also feel that as the elite uses their authority over political power to make it act according to their interests, the ‘corrupt’ governments de-prioritises the developmental work for the common man. In most societies, the elite is scornfully looked at by struggling common people as they feel that the rich and the elite enjoys a life of privilege due to their ‘high-profile’ family influence, illicit connections and ill-gotten money.’ Usually, the elite is seen to be very close to the ‘traditional political establishment’ due to their access to power. The populist leaders tap into such strong anti-elite sentiments of the majority of the common people and projects themselves as ‘an outsider’ in politics who would punish the ‘compromised’ elite if voted to power.<sup>29</sup> Very interestingly, the demand for ‘strong’ leadership has been prioritised by the people. Hence, the majority of people emphatically believes that strong leadership is needed for efficient governance, paving the way for populist charismatic leaders to emerge.

### **What constitutes the populist discourse in India?**

From the above findings, few major trends help to explain the success of populist leaders in India’s political landscape. First, there is a clear preference for ‘strong’ leadership for providing efficient governance as well as for salvaging any ‘crisis-like’ situation. Second, anti-elite sentiment has been very strong amongst most respondents. Third, most considers migrants, refugees and outsider as threats for the society and burden on the society’s resources. Fourth, social welfare in terms of free or subsidised ration, healthcare, education, shelter, monthly cash doles for certain sections are popular amongst the lower and lower-middle class respondents. But these policies are abhorred by sections of upper-middle class who are more concerned with governmental support for tax reduction and higher pension. Fifth, the narrative of ‘Hindu majority marginalisation in the past’, ‘Muslim appeasement by pseudo-secular parties’ have some traction amongst the respondents, making it conducive for ethno-populist rhetoric. However, in this study, the support for minority protection by an ideal leader has been quite emphatic despite some calls for ideal leader to work at the behest of the majority. Lastly, institutions like judiciary, political opposition and parliament are considered as important instruments for restraining authoritarian governments, protecting the constitution, consensus building in policy making and governance, inclusive law-making. However, the delay and inefficiency in providing justice, relief and accountable governance to the people, creates room for public disaffection with such institutions. Hence, people believe that institutions of

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Wike, “Many Across the Globe Are Dissatisfied With How Democracy Is Working,” *Pew Research Centre*, April 29, 2019

democracy are important but gets restive and disenchanted with their functioning as they want speedy development and adherence to the public demands. In such context, populist appeal from a charismatic personality assuring to provide ‘strong’ leadership, showing the ‘compromised’ elite their place, distribution of welfare goods, taking action against the threatening ‘migrants’ and ‘outsiders’ gets public support.

### **Major characteristics of the populist leadership appeal**

- ***Rhetoric of anti-elitism***

For all the three leaders in the study, an overarching point of appeal has been their humble and simple life marked by a plethora of personal struggles and sacrifices. As seen in the above section, there is a strong public aversion to the image of the elite and their privileged life. Hence, an element of immorality is inextricably linked to the public perception of the ‘elite.’ Hence, the appeal of being an undoubtable underdog, underprivileged and impoverished, gave them a moral legitimacy to thrive in public life as leaders who do not belong to the elite class. In the Indian context, the image of an ‘ascetic, simple, humble’ leader who has witnessed the travails of poverty, pain and loss, have gained public sympathy and support in electoral politics. The genesis of this political culture can be traced to the stature of Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle who donned on the loin cloth and mastered the ‘act of renunciation’ of all material comfort to relate to the everyday struggles of the hapless masses in the Indian subcontinent. Gandhi’s saintly politics of ‘self-abnegation’ became the most cogent political imagery in the post-independence politics. The rhetoric of poverty, renunciation and struggle became the performative *modus operandi* for leaders to mobilise the masses in electoral politics.<sup>30</sup> So, the rhetoric of humility, simplicity and struggle is not unique to the political styles of Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal. But, their distinctive styles of articulating the rhetoric of poverty and simplicity have aided their populist political appeal. For Modi, the image of being a teaseller’s son who himself have spent part of his childhood selling tea at the railway station, looms quite large in his rhetoric of humility and sufferings. His repeated sharing of anecdotes about his poverty-stricken childhood that have contributed to his sufferings and struggles along with his family, especially his mother’s struggles, have left a lasting impression on his public image. His political constituency have been quite receptive of this rhetoric and

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<sup>30</sup> Himanshu, “India's politics and the poor,” *ECFR*, October 2020,

[https://ecfr.eu/special/what\\_does\\_india\\_think/analysis/indias\\_politics\\_and\\_the\\_poor](https://ecfr.eu/special/what_does_india_think/analysis/indias_politics_and_the_poor)

have exhibited enormous amount of sympathy and respect for his struggles. Modi's image as a leader who has been besieged by the struggle of 'poverty' have been coupled by his struggle of leading a lonely life. His asceticism not only stems from his underprivileged family background but also from his act of repudiation of family life and embarking on a path of saintly penance for a life of solitude without any support system, companion or worldly pleasures. Hence, both the aspects- hailing from a poor family and absence of family support made his imagery of an ascetic extremely compelling for the people. Modi, very craftily, have positioned his ascetic image against the rhetoric of dynastic leadership, starting with the Gandhi family to other family-led parties across states in India. This gave an alternative template of political leadership to the people, a leader who is unencumbered by the obligations, bonding and responsibilities of family life fully available for and committed to national service. On one hand, Modi's exposure to poverty and his identity as an Other Backward Caste (OBC) leader made him a relatable figure to the multitude of poor and marginalised communities across the country as 'one of their own.' On the other hand, his ascetic life embodying his self-discipline and selflessness and his journey from being tea seller to taking over as the leader of the country, invokes awe and admiration for being 'extraordinary' amongst his supporters. Most importantly, Modi's stature as someone who have scaled the heights of success from humble beginnings, invoke a sense of pride in the aspirational lower and middle classes that one amongst them have attained such greatness in life. Unlike Mamata and Kejriwal, after Modi's ascent to power, he didn't have to continue to perform his plebian lifestyle anymore. Modi's attire and lifestyle have been quite in accordance with his stature with all the comfort and style statements.<sup>31</sup> Rather, his attire has taken the form of the much-touted Modi brand. Rather than any scorn towards his lifestyle, his supporters take pride in the fact that Modi has earned it all with love and support of the people of the country and by his sheer hard work and commitment towards the country.

Also, the performative aspect of projecting oneself as a plebian also serves another crucial purpose of positioning oneself as a non-elite, someone who is outside of the 'elite political establishment' which is perceived as 'corrupt and compromised.' Hence, public perception of Modi as a non-elite and outsider aided his claims to teach the corrupt and privileged elite a lesson by dismantling their illicit nexus once he comes to power.

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<sup>31</sup> Vinod Chandrashekhar Dixit, "Why Modi's Kurta has become famous world over?," *early Times*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.earlytimes.in/newsdet.aspx?q=265851>

For Mamata, struggle has been the overwhelming narrative that has dominated her claims to attain popular support and also captures the public imagination of her. Mamata Banerjee's personal life history also reveals her upbringing in a humble family with many siblings and she faced acute financial hardship very early in life after her father's untimely demise. Though her encounter with financial distress and her emergence from difficult financial conditions remains etched in the public memory of her supporters, her dominant plank for public legitimacy and support comes from her imagery as a 'bold woman' who have endured and is still going through a lot of struggles in life. The narrative of struggle doesn't only comprise of poverty or the burden of managing a large household on her own from a very young age. It also stems from the steep path that she has had to traverse in politics to emerge at the pinnacle of political glory in the political landscape of Bengal. The common perception amongst the people that she has hailed from an ordinary lower-middle class family and have faced endless struggles as a lone woman leader in a male-dominated and patriarchal political ecosystem, have created her political appeal.

Unlike Modi, despite remaining unmarried, Mamata has live together with her large family in their modest family home. Though she is not the eldest sibling, she as a responsible and caring sister, have taken care of her family and has emerged as the matriarch of her family. Such sense of responsibility towards family despite a lucrative and busy political career, is seen with admiration as women's sense of feminine affection towards family which common women can relate to. What has immensely bolstered her public legitimacy as a 'strong leader', 'mass leader' and 'a streetfighter' is her encounter with numerous physical assaults and she being subjected to political violence, as the opposition leader during left rule in Bengal. Mamata's relentless struggle in fighting the mighty left front regime in Bengal, staging demonstrations, dharnas and protests against several governmental excesses and policies strengthened her image as a 'bold street fighter.' Also, her supporters share profuse sympathy for her as she had to withstand a number of physical assaults from her political opponents. The fact that she has displayed remarkable 'nerve of steel' and resilience to endure all such sufferings, endeared her to her supporters.

She is possibly very rare amongst the top political leaders in the country who has received fatal injuries in the course of her political fight. This has strengthened her 'mass leader' image who personally fought on the streets against a mighty political establishment. This makes her different from 'armchair' leaders who remains confined to ivory towers while their cadres fight for them on the streets. Moreover, her differences with her erstwhile party (Congress) due to

the party's reservations regarding her strong stand against the left front regime in Bengal, severed her ties with Congress.<sup>32</sup> She was expelled from the party after which she was left on her own to float a new party. So, she also received public sympathy and appreciation for continuing her fight against the left rule, despite lack of any support system and threats of violence. Hence, struggle remains the *raison d'être* of her political profile which connects her to her constituency. She also projects herself as not only a devout believer of Goddess *Kali* but also perceives herself as someone who has always received extraordinary blessings from the divine to overcome all these struggles in life. Such claims not only projects her as a believer but also makes her a relatable figure for lakhs of ordinary women in Bengal who are deeply religious and has profound faith in the mercy of the almighty for keeping their families safe and healthy.

Mamata's repeated invocations of her deep sense of religiosity makes her look like a relatable 'god-fearing' simple woman, a profile that is common in lower and middle-class families across Bengal. At the same time, her image as someone extraordinary, stems from the perception that she is blessed with god's blessings that has helped her to overcome such humongous struggles in life and attain such great heights of success in politics. Her religiosity and superstition have been manifested in public imagination as someone who is a 'simple woman' yet blessed with 'extraordinary zeal' for greatness in life. Hence, in Mamata's public appeal, being relatable and being awe-inspiring goes hand-in-hand, all within the larger populist dimension of being seen as a resilient 'underdog.'

One strong aspect that enhances Mamata's populist appeal is her indisputable non-elite image. Her 'simple' attire (white cotton sari and slippers), her 'humble' family home, her 'frugal' eating habits and other aspects of her lifestyle, builds her 'commoner' and 'non-elite' demeanour. What makes her stand out is that she still practices her humble lifestyle even today after reaching heights of political success. Her ordinary family background and lack of any powerful backing or support system or influential mentor in her political career, make her a completely 'self-made' leader who had no prior association with the elite establishment. What adds to her public perception as someone who is 'simple, bold and relatable' are her expressions and communication in the public which is often seen as unsophisticated and spontaneous. She

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<sup>32</sup> Shiv Sahay Singh, "Congress is still atoning for Mamata's expulsion, says party veteran Pradip Bhattacharya," *The Hindu*, January 6, 2025,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/west-bengal/congress-is-still-atoning-for-mamatas-expulsion-says-party-veteran-pradip-bhattacharya/article69065278.ece>

is seen admonishing her party colleagues publicly, threatening her political rivals who is trying to humiliate her or obstruct her government's development work, making erroneous utterances of poems, songs and many public statements. This builds her public profile as someone who is fallible and humane with her share of mistakes, limitations and glitches just like anyone else. Her public image as someone who can reprimand recalcitrant political leaders of her party and bureaucrats in her government, strengthens the public belief amongst her supporters that only she can tackle the 'misguided and inefficient and corrupt elite.' She is also often seen threatening her political rivals in aggressive tone, unconventional for a sitting Chief Minister, makes her seen in public as 'bold woman leader' who can tackle and subdue her powerful political rivals, like the mighty Modi-led Central government in Delhi. Her constant rejections of 'elite' ways of behaviour and public conduct, her speeches in broken English with lack of fluency in high corridors of affluence, all are seen as a rebellion against the dominant elitist *modus operandi* in politics and society. This has cemented her position amongst the lower classes and the rural people as someone who is 'one of their own' but has reached the pinnacle of power, dismantling the elite dominance, arrogance and pride of having exclusive access to power, prestige and privilege in society.

For Arvind Kejriwal, populist public appeal based on his 'common man' image is extremely strong. The major thrust of his appeal stemmed from his profile as someone who is entirely outside the political establishment. His appeal thrives on his absolute disassociation with any prior political affiliation or ideology and his promise to mark a departure from the conventional modalities of politics which works in a clandestine and discreet manner with limited accountability and often in cahoots with corrupt vested interest. The people look at him as the beacon of hope and new beginning of 'good politics.' Unlike Modi or Mamata, Kejriwal belongs to a well-to-do educated middle-class family. Hence, the traditional label of poverty-stricken family background and childhood do not stick on him. So, the performative aspects of being seen as a plebian doesn't go down to acute poverty or destitution. Rather, Kejriwal's simplicity emanates from his ordinary, humble, middle-class, unostentatious lifestyle. His asceticism and repudiation of a comfortable life comes from the fact that he has left his much-coveted civil service job to devote his life to social service. His 'self-abnegation' doesn't come from 'poor family' baggage, rather it is about the ability to give up a life of comfort, security and respect that he had for the sake of public service. In a societal ecosystem in which politics is seen as a resort of the uneducated, criminal and duplicity, Kejriwal's political entry as an 'educated clean common' man gave rise to unprecedented hope amongst the people. The hope

has been around Kejriwal's personality as a crusader of corruption and an instrument of positive change that would clean the malice of the traditional political system. Kejriwal, through his pronouncements and actions, tried to gain public confidence to further his claim that he is not only different but also sincere about truly representing the will of the people in the structure of politics and government. The performative aspects of Kejriwal's claims to be an ordinary man has left deep imprints in the imagination of his constituency.

His rejection of traditional political attire of politics, which is kurta and pyjama and continue with his usual simple shirt and trousers and muffler in the chilling cold of Delhi, rakes up the mass imagination of an extremely indistinctive urban common middle-class next-door man. The absence of any prior political legacies strengthened the optimistic public expectation from Kejriwal to 'practise a different political culture' in which the elite interests are de-prioritised and governmental accountability is strengthened on his entry in politics. With a background in civil services, social activism for defending citizens' rights, demanding governmental accountability and fighting institutional corruption, public expectation is extremely high on him to clean the inefficiency and lack of transparency in the political system that has for long marred developmental work and essential public services. Most importantly, he is seen as someone who can reverse the elite capture of representative institutions of democracy and make them truly accountable to the people by ushering in path-breaking reforms. Kejriwal's common man image created his strong 'populist public appeal of hope' in a form of 'redemptive politics.'

- ***Claims of extraordinariness***

Being able to project oneself as underdog is one spectrum of the populist imagery of the three leaders. The other simultaneous appeal is being seen as extraordinary despite being an underdog or a simple common person. While the simplicity and commonness help their supporters to relate to these leaders as 'one of their own', their extraordinariness instils awe and pride amongst their supporters and give public legitimacy for them to scale great heights in politics. It is this 'extraordinariness' despite hailing from ordinary background that makes these leaders worthy to occupying high chairs in politics. The ability to rise above the average, the ability to behave, think and act differently, the ability to be bold, courageous, frank, fearless and the resilience to rise above all odds, gives them the worthiness to become leaders of much importance whom millions follow. Just as Plato's philosopher king in his magna carta, *The Republic*, was seen as someone beyond the ordinary who had the philosophical wisdom and

political skills to lead, people expect their representative to be both normal like them as well as ‘extraordinary’ to protect and lead them to glory.<sup>33</sup> All the three leaders in our study have made such claims to being extraordinary in their political communication. In response to that, their followers and supporters have also started perceiving the ‘extraordinariness’ of their leaders in different ways and varying measures. Modi’s claims of being able to give up all worldly pleasures of life for public service and reach the highest echelon in politics as the country’s Prime Minister is looked at with awe amongst his supporters. Once in office as CM of Gujarat, his extraordinary and tough approach in governance is widely appreciated. His politics of Hindutva is perceived as bold and he is credited for giving the Hindu majority their pride of place that was long overdue because of the pseudo-secular ‘politics of Muslim appeasement’ by other parties. Modi’s ‘Gujarat model’ of governance is projected by him and BJP as a spectacular model of development. Though the details of such model of development have not been always understood by all in great details, it is seen as a governance architecture that provides better life to the people which is not seen in any other state. Modi is believed to personally intervene in every governmental policy to remove all bureaucratic bottlenecks to make Gujarat a highly favoured business destination in the country. He, presiding over the annual ‘Vibrant Gujarat’ Summit, has been the most visible performative imagery of Modi personifying ‘investment, big business, growth, corruption-free development and prosperity’ in Gujarat.

Modi’s penchant for ‘spectacular governance’ remained his modus operandi even as the Prime Minister. He projected every governmental policy as an unprecedented and unthinkable development happening with his imprimatur and under his bold and innovative stewardship. Few major events like demonetisation, abrogation of Article 370, construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya, construction of new parliament house, surgical strike in Pakistan, criminalisation of the practise of triple talak, construction of toilets and distribution of gas connections in rural India, all are projected and have been perceived as Modi’s governance magic that has never happened before in India. Also, Modi has claimed and is believed to uplift India’s image and Hindu civilisational heritage on the global stage with UN recognition of International Yoga Day, India’s ‘exceptionally propagated’ G20 Presidency, India’s successful Mars and Lunar Mission happening successfully under ‘his motivation.’ Modi’s high-decibel televised diaspora

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<sup>33</sup> Giulia Matassa, “Plato’s Argument for Rule by Philosopher Kings,” *E-International Relations*, April 17, 2013 [https://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/17/should-philosophers-rule/#google\\_vignette](https://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/17/should-philosophers-rule/#google_vignette)

events in different countries and images of his high-profile meetings with world leaders is widely celebrated amongst his supporters as evidence of Modi's popularity amongst people around the globe and recognition of Modi's authority as an influential global leader. All of these achievements are perceived and claimed to be a feat rarely achieved by any other Indian leader in the past. Modi's public statements on his innovative interventions in bringing transformational governance and developmental outcomes never tried before by any other leader or never thought of by the experts, are also indicative of his extraordinary image. Modi's self-fashioning as a leader who breaks all stereotypes in Indian politics to make new remarkable records is visible in his often-made claims that his policies and electoral victories should make the political pundits to rethink their standard assumptions about politics. Hence, as an extraordinary disruptive force, he is seen as a provider of exceptional national leadership and governance amongst his supporters.

Mamata's public appeal is also replete with the rhetoric of 'extraordinary' leadership but in different ways. First, her image as someone who have battled with poverty and extremely difficult circumstances in life to survive in the rugged terrain of politics, especially as a woman, makes her remarkable to her followers. The reminders about the repeated fatal physical assaults that she had to endure during her struggling political career while fighting against the 'aggressive' and 'powerful' left front regime, not only invokes public sympathy but also admiration for her extraordinary grit and endurance. Mamata's narration of her encounters with physical violence of the past also includes the mention of how such irreparable injuries causes her discomfort in her everyday life even today, attracting public sympathy till date. This has been craftily put in the public imagination as her continued experience of pain and struggle even today, though the wounds were inflicted in the past. Making her way up the ladder in a profession as insidious, competitive, risky, violence-prone, male-dominated as politics, makes her an inspiring figure among the women constituency. She is understood by the women voters as a woman leader who have emerged from an ordinary family background like theirs but have the strong grit, courage and will-power to fight against all odds and defeated 'powerful men' in order to succeed in politics. However, serving the people relentlessly despite personal struggles and sufferings builds on her aura of 'extraordinariness.'

Mamata's claims of extraordinariness also stems from her public revelation about her passion for art and Bengali literature and music. Despite her hectic life as a full-time politician, she has been seen who plays musical instruments, writes poems and her memoirs accounting various aspects and experiences of her life and also got them published. She also makes paintings which

are exhibited and auctioned and have also written songs and had them composed and recorded. This can also be seen as attempts to create awe and surprise in people about how she can manage to pursue so many passions and nurture such a wide array of skills, despite being a politician of such high stature throughout her life. Naturally, such ability of having multi-dimensional skills is a demonstration of being an exceptional personality. Also, Mamata's imagery as a caring elder sister invokes a unique feminine aura of a matriarch who is a provider of security and welfare to her people. This image is buttressed by the rolling out of a plethora of social security and welfare schemes by her government in Bengal. Those government schemes, many of which are cash transfers and vocational training initiatives exclusively for women, are seen as Mamata's direct gift or generous grant to her people in order to provide them the basic necessities for a dignified life and a sense of empowerment that comes with financial security. This constitutes her stature as an extraordinary leader who delivers governance to her people. The allegations of corruption against many of her party leaders in the process of implementation of such welfare measures do not appear to seriously dent Mamata's image or credibility. This is mainly because she is seen as someone unblemished by such allegations, rather she is regarded as the only force which can stop such illicit activities within her party and government by exercising her strong grip over party and government. Amongst her party workers, supporters and for sizeable section of common voters, she is the sole figure who is seen as the provider of all aspects of governance, welfare and justice.

Arvind Kejriwal's public appeal stems from the promise of 'newness' and 'hope' to change things in politics for the better. What has added to his aura of extraordinariness is the fact that a middle-class professional who had a comfortable job in civil services have given it up to change India's politics. Prior to joining politics, he also had a long stint as a noted political activist who advocated institutional reforms to make governance institutions more accountable and responsive to people's needs. This has helped to build his reputation as someone who want to make the political system more pro-people by changing the status-quo. The conventional societal assumption is that usually an educated middle-class family man with a stable government job would remain away from the turbulent and insidious landscape of electoral politics. The fact that Kejriwal took that 'risk' of giving up the comfort of his middle-class secured life to bring positive change in the society and have taken up the struggle of trying to change the politics of this society, makes him extraordinary. Kejriwal has defied the profile of a conventional politician in many ways. He is not a career politician who started pursuing

politics right from the beginning of his career. Rather, his life resembled an average ‘well-to-do’ and ‘respected’ middle-class government servant in Delhi.

It is his ‘disillusionment’ with the ‘system’ that led him to eschew his civil service job, an extremely lucrative and much-coveted career prospect in India and plunge into political activism to make a difference in society. This has created an aura of ‘difference’, ‘uniqueness’ and ‘extraordinariness’ amongst the people about Kejriwal. What has propelled him into the public imagination as the ‘crusader’ of political reforms is his visibility and leadership in the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement that rocked the national capital and grabbed the country’s attention in 2011. This cemented Kejriwal’s image as a potent and committed force who wanted to drive positive change to get the political system and the country rid of corrupt, immoral and inefficient political culture. This has led to the birth of enormous hope and optimism amongst the people regarding Kejriwal’s decision to launch his own political party, Aam Admi Party (AAP). There has been a massive public expectation that he is ‘different’ and would usher in new positive culture to mitigate the rot in the political system. The fact that Kejriwal didn’t join any of the existing traditional or mainstream parties, and launched his own party, meant that he would start a new political discourse of his own and not associate himself with any existing political establishment.

His public appeal also got an impetus from the fact that he could convince a sizeable section of people that his political outfit is a people’s movement for cleaning up the democratic political ecosystem and making the governmental structures truly accountable to the people. Kejriwal’s cult was premised upon people being able to relate to his cause due to the years of pent-up disaffection and complains about the political system. People saw in him the answer to the problems that has grappled the political system. He and his party represented the popular aspiration of finally getting a platform that will ‘truly’ represent the voices of the common people. A common man, an AAP sympathiser, felt that Kejriwal’s quest for cleaning up the politics is his own battle too and he felt included in the movement. This feeling of inclusiveness in AAP’s ‘politics of hope’ was manifested in the highly successful membership drive of the party after it was formed.<sup>34</sup> Here, Kejriwal’s performative self-fashioning also played a role in strengthening his political appeal. Kejriwal’s appearance as an ordinary looking, unassuming,

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<sup>34</sup> “30,000 People in City Sign Up With AAP In a week,” *The New Indian Express*, December 20, 2013,

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/bengaluru/2013/Dec/20/30000-people-in-city-sign-up-with-aap-in-a-week-553335.html>

nondescript man trying to do something so extraordinary and great, endeared him to many and strengthened his populist cult. His politics of difference had many shades. Inspired by Kejriwal's call for cleaning up politics, many working professionals gave up their attractive high-paying jobs in order to plunge into the noble movement of serving the country. Also, AAP's outreach to people for crowdfunding for fighting the elections made people feel involved and gave them a sense of participation in contributing to AAP's rise. Also, it boosted AAP claim to be honest and different from mainstream parties who relies mainly on big corporate funding. This strengthened AAP and Kejriwal's claim to be people's party and movement making Kejriwal's claim to leadership in politics as 'extraordinary and unprecedented.' Kejriwal, after forming his party and even after becoming the CM of AAP government in Delhi, have deployed multiple unique tactics that gave the people an impression of being included in his party and government's everyday political affairs.

His party and government's constant process of seeking public opinion before taking any major political or policy decision made AAP's supporters believe that people's voices are being taken seriously and is being heard by their own leader, Kejriwal. Kejriwal and his party threw constant political salvos against the ruling parties at the Centre by staging dharnas and demonstrations, first against the Congress under UPA and then followed by the BJP under NDA. This made him appear as an uncompromising and aggressive political activist who wants to shake up the traditional parties from their slumber to act more efficiently in providing governance.<sup>35</sup> Finally, once in government, his welfare measures attempted to make everyday necessities of Delhi's poor and middle-class people met with governmental subsidies and exemptions in electricity, water in every household and provided free public transport for women commuters. Also, good quality school education for children and affordable and accessible healthcare have also been initiated as attempts to improve the everyday lives of the ordinary people.<sup>36</sup> Kejriwal's principled distance from the issues of caste and religion, at least in the initial years of his political career, and steadfast focus on local issues of governance and development strengthened his image as extraordinary.

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<sup>35</sup> Darpan Singh, "AAP 2.0: A rookie's journey from dharnas to development politics," *hindustantimes*, January 14, 2015, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/aap-2-0-a-rookie-s-journey-from-dharnas-to-development-politics/story-ITZgwi39wEjQP4nFBIbn4M.html>

<sup>36</sup> Sourav Roy Barman, "Battle-ready: Kejriwal's transition from the perpetual protester to the affable family man," *The Indian Express*, January 5, 2020,

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/battle-ready-delhi-assembly-polls-arvind-kejriwal-bjp-6199882/>

- ***Exclusive representation claims***

The three leaders could successfully project themselves as people's 'true' representatives. In a typical populist framework, the creation of the 'true' or 'authentic' people have been the focus of the political appeal of these leaders. As Paul Taggart has pointed it out, for populists to become politically relevant, they need "to define the people in terms of some of the key features of the self-identification of the targeted community."<sup>37</sup> In tune with Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities',<sup>38</sup> the 'people' is often constructed as an empty or floating signifiers by making representation claims to different sections of people based on the leader's political expediency. In the populist discourse, a leader directs his political communication to a manufactured 'homogenous people'. Such a category of people is projected as exclusive and homogenous whom the leader calls 'the most virtuous yet marginalised', a group whom the populist guarantees true representation if he captures or remains in power. Hence, the 'people' is created to represent 'an idealized conception of the community.'<sup>39</sup> However, this community of people is politically manufactured as the leader's core constituency whom the leader convinces that he would represent such 'people' in power. Such people are mobilised as the most righteous, authentic and hard-working lot who have been deprived of their own rights and opportunities for their emancipation due to the conspiracy or dominance of the 'other.'

The 'other' in the framework of the populist appeal is projected as the hindrance that is obstructing the true representation and speedy development of the 'authentic people.' The 'other' in the rhetoric of the populist leader is often the political rivals or opposition parties, the established elite, minorities and migrants amongst other categories. The populist leaders in our study have made exclusive representation claims by forming different categories of 'people' based on their political requirement, context and electoral obligations. Since broad-based social support is extremely important for winning electoral mandates in a polity as diverse as India, more than one category of people is created by the leaders to make multi-layered political appeal to different constituencies and sections of people. The construction of the idea of 'the people' by the leaders can be deciphered by studying the leader's

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<sup>37</sup> Cas Mudde, "An Ideational Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Christobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983

<sup>39</sup> Paul Taggart, *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000

communication regarding their representation claims and also by understanding people's perception regarding whom the leaders represent in politics as well as in office.

Narendra Modi, as a national leader with almost pan-India appeal, has a very broad-based populist conception of the 'people' he claims to represent which has many aspects. First, as the tallest leader of the BJP with a very strong and long association with Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), he has projected himself as a devout and committed Hindutva leader. With his undisputed credentials as a strong proponent of Hindutva politics, the *Hindu Hriday Samrat* from Gujarat, he has projected himself as the bold and indomitable defender of the Hindu majority and the biggest facilitator in implementing the political agendas of the Hindutva project. His categorical thrust on Hindu reawakening and glorification of the Hindu civilisational heritage along with the high-decibel plank of Hindu nationalism, makes him the tallest Hindutva leader in India. For the supporters of 'Hindutva political narrative' that calls for the resurgence of the Hindu majority to reclaim their civilisational greatness, Modi features as the most reliable figure, most committed Hindu leader working relentlessly for that cause. Second, if the plank of religious politics is one central pillar of Modi's representative claims, another strategy of galvanising the majority of people is his appeal to the poor and marginalised sections. Modi, with his compelling image as an underdog who have had witnessed the travails of poverty and financial distress right from his childhood, is seen by the poor as 'their own' leader.

Modi's repeated invocations of his experiences of acute poverty and deprivation and his identity as an OBC, made him image as someone who understands the pain of the poor and the humiliation of the backward castes. So, as their leader, he would be unrelenting in assuaging the problems of the poor and marginalised groups by representing their cause in the highest echelons of political power. Modi's ascent to the highest chair of power in the country is seen with immense pride by his supporters from the poor and marginalised communities, as someone 'like them' have achieved such unimaginable success in life. The middle class, the upper middle class and the higher classes who are not enamoured by the narratives of Hindutva and povertarian politics, have seen Modi as a mascot for 'advancing the national interest.' They are enchanted by the narratives of enhancement of India's global reputation and stature under Modi's leadership and India being able to give befitting and strong military response to the enemy neighbours with Modi as the PM. Hence, the 'sentiment of the nationalists' is another category of 'people' whose interests Modi claims to fulfil and is popularly perceived to represent. Along with the supporters of nationalism, Modi's appeal to the young and the

professionals as a leader who can provide efficient, corruption-free and digitally driven governance in an ecosystem which is safe and violence-free along with being business-friendly, creates another crucial constituency. Hence, Modi's multiple claims of representation have propelled him to often create exclusive as well as overlapping categories of 'people' that has broadened his nationwide populist appeal amongst the people.

Mamata's deep-rooted and compelling populist political appeal is based on her ability to make representative claims across social categories. Within Bengal's political landscape, Mamata's broad-based support base has enabled her to create different 'people' whom she claims to represent and whom the people thinks that she represents through her politics. First, as an underdog who has witnessed the turmoil and struggles of poverty and deprivation and dons a plebian image through her attire, communication and lifestyle, she has a clear claim of representing the 'poor' as well as 'backward and marginalised communities.' Her government's slew of social security measures and cash doles mainly targeted towards the poor and lower middle classes also gave credence to her claims to represent the poor, underdog and plebians. Second, Mamata's identity as an ordinary woman, by virtue of her relentless struggle and perseverance, have dented the male-dominated political bastion to emerge as a formidable politician, invokes pride amongst woman. Her caring outreach to the people exhibiting her feminine protective side of her persona, her special bond with the common womenfolk, has been very crucial for her political support.

Especially, the resonance of her appeal amongst the lower and middle classes and rural women community, helps her built a rock-solid support base of women constituency. Her government's number of hugely popular welfare schemes, skill development programme and cash doles designed especially for women, makes her representative claims amongst woman much stronger. This has helped her to make exclusive claims of fighting for the dignity and needs of women and representing their interests in politics. Lastly, Mamata's strong and aggressive pitch as the fierce defender of the rights, reputation and interests of Bengal at all costs, makes her the tallest leader of Bengal. Her interests in promoting Bengali language, art, cinema, literature and efforts to protect the legacy of legendary luminaries of Bengal in all fields, makes her undisputed custodian of Bengal's interests. Mamata's relentless crusade against the central government to get the rightful share of resources for Bengal, oppose policies that can jeopardise Bengal's interest or to stage resistance to protect the interests of Bengal, makes her the most vocal representative of Bengal's interest in the country.

Kejriwal's construction of the people is two-fold. One is the promise of reformed, corruption-free and 'new politics' which is responsive to the needs of the people and not made of compromised elite. When Kejriwal emerged in the national scene as a new entrant in politics, it was his promise of 'clean politics' as a political outsider and a committed and educated activist, that made his political appeal different from others. The pent-up anger, frustration, disappointment, and fatigue with the political system for being corrupt, inefficient and only representative of the 'elite interest', found resonance in Kejriwal's call for 'cleaning up' the political process. Also, as many people cutting across classes, have harboured the feeling of despondency with the democratic system and elected leaders for being corrupt and self-centred, he represented the 'hope for change for the better' in politics.

Hence, construction of the imagery of 'people' involves all well-meaning, hard-working and concerned citizens who are fed up with political corruption and misgovernance and wants a leader who truly represents their interests. Second, the poor sections of people who struggles to meet their daily basic expenses for making their ends meet in a metropolis like Delhi which has a high cost of living, getting governmental support to meet basic necessities, endeared them to Kejriwal. By providing free or subsidised ration, electricity and water along with free bus transport for women, Kejriwal government made the life of urban poor easier. Improved quality of education for children by improving the infrastructure of government schools in Delhi and creation of 'Mohalla Clinics' in every locality, made primary healthcare accessible to the poor, giving them an aspiration for a life of dignity. This has created Kejriwal's image as a 'true representative' of the poor people who understands their governance needs and actually delivers it.

### **Populism as a dominant discourse in Indian politics**

It is established in this study that populist rhetorics from the leader receives positive response from the people in a specific context in which the salience of populist ideas are high in a society. Without the larger public adherence to and collective legitimacy for the populist ideas, principles and beliefs, it is unlikely for any populist leader to be able to further his or her populist agenda amongst the voters. The fallacies, complexities and shortcomings of representative democracy and the ineffectiveness of its institutions, seems to have led the populist doctrine to gain popular traction in democratic politics across the world. Our study also corroborates this development. First, the rising economic inequality seems to have created unprecedented resentment in the common people against the elite and affluent classes. The

standard public suspicion remains that such affluence of the elite has been achieved by illicit activities or by forging clandestine deals with the political elite for making huge financial gains often at the cost of ordinary people and with the taxes paid by the common citizens. Such strong and negative public perception about an alleged deep unholy nexus between the political, economic and socio-cultural elite, gave legitimacy to anti-elite sentiments amongst the common public. This perception had been further aggravated by the dysfunctional and unaccountable conduct of the different institutions of democracy which are supposed to serve the people with welfare and development. Partly due to weak state capacity and rapidly increasing population and partly due to institutional corruption, democratic institutions have failed to cater to the demands and respond to the concerns of the common people. Governmental services and welfare delivery have been laggard, inadequate and inflicted by corruption. Infrastructural development has mainly focussed on facilitating big ticket industrial ecosystem rather than easing the life of ordinary people. Mass employment opportunities for the ordinary sections have also remained inadequate along with increasing challenge of high prices that makes everyday sustenance for low-income households challenging. Also, post-globalisation exposure to western model of glamorous development and high standard to living have raised the aspirations of the educated classes and expects much more from its government and leadership.

Most importantly, with the deepening of democratic participation of people in the political life, demands from governments have increased manifold due to heightened sense of political and civic awareness amongst the people. Failure of the established political elite to meet such rising public expectations have led to resentment about democratic and political institutions. Not only the elected institutions, the delays in the functioning of the judiciary, the compromised reputation of the legislature and media as working at the behest of political elite, have diminished the public trust in the institutions of democracy which are ideally designed only to serve the people. Also, the paranoia of further socio-economic pressure on the country's resources by minorities and migrants, have raised the scepticism, distrust and insecurity among a sizeable section of natives and majority community populace. Under such circumstances, a leader who can claim to be outside the political elite and promise more efficient and representative politics and make strong claim about being extraordinarily strong who can salvage all challenges in an increasingly uncertain world, makes a successful populist appeal. With the diffused and extremely complex dynamics of the political parties, it is the image of this leader which becomes the most visible instrument of hope and democratic revival for the

people embedded in a populist value system. All the three leaders in our study have been seen to adhere to the main planks of the populist discourses. Though there are differences and varieties in the kind of populist appeal they make and the way people look at them, the political potency of their populist appeals is massive. However, the moot point remains that these leaders succeed in their populist appeals because it gives a glimmer of hope to the people that by bestowing their support to these leaders, they might get back the substantive real power to impact and be a part of representative democracy. As popular sovereignty remains the central promise of representative democracy, people take refuge under populist appeal to achieve their missing voice in democratic politics.

## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION**

Populism, due to its immensely fluid nature as a concept, have been studied and understood from different perspectives.<sup>1</sup> Since the concept of populism can't be 'reducible to a single core', it has been analysed through many spectrums, which are varied, many a time, contradictory as well. However, there are certain broad compelling dominant attributes that shape the populist political discourse. Such attributes can be identified as the 'people', 'elite', 'general will' and most importantly morality. The fundamental pull of the populist doctrine lies in its moral claim to course correct the crisis in the representative democracy by facilitating the reinstatement of the dominance of popular sovereignty in the institutions of democratic governance. The heart of the populist pitch lies in the moral revolutionary pursuit for 'good politics' that truly represents the people by removing the 'corrupt elite or the threatening other.' Hence, populism makes it a crucial need to put the moral struggle of reviving the 'representative' character of the institutional democracy on a tangible figure which is often a 'charismatic leader.'

As one of the dominant perspectives, populism is widely perceived as a political strategy of a 'charismatic' leader in order to mobilise the masses.<sup>2</sup> Though, charisma, as a concept can itself be highly subjective and fleeting, it gives a strong sense of 'extraordinariness' and 'moral legitimacy' to make a leadership claim for truly representing the 'authentic and virtuous' people. Robert House's description of a charismatic leader can be helpful to explain the phenomenon of charismatic populist leadership. He notes that "charismatic leaders display certain personality characteristics, such as being dominant, having a strong desire to influence others, being self-confident, and having a strong conviction in the moral righteousness of his or her beliefs and ideals."<sup>3</sup>

This is mostly in tune with Weber who feels that "the charismatic leader acquires this role by virtue of personal trust in revelation, heroism, or exemplary qualities within the domain where belief in such charisma prevails." It is true that many populist leaders possess charisma, which Weber defines as "the personal quality that makes an individual seem extraordinary, a quality by virtue of which supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or properties are attributed to the individual".<sup>4</sup> The mass disaffection with the 'established elite' embedded in

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a contested concept: 'populism' in the study of Latin American politics," *Comparative Politics*, 34(1): 1–22, 2001

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> R.J. House, R. J., "A 1976 theory of charismatic leadership", In J. G. Hunt & L. L. Larson (Eds.), *Leadership: The cutting edge* (pp. 189–207). Southern Illinois University Press, 1976

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and society*. Harvard University Press, ([1921] 2019).

the state structures makes institutions in democracy extremely alien and remote entities for people. In this context, personalistic leadership who rakes up the ‘real’ concerns and ‘insecurities’ of the society and people, give rise to the leader’s populist charisma with claims of ‘true’ democratic representation. Hence, it is the ‘populist leader’ who alone is seen to have the redemptive capacity to transform the politics and provide ‘good governance’ and welfare. Hence, Hartwell & Devinney has pointed out, “the populist leader is the vehicle that transforms populism from being an idea to becoming a vector that creates substantive institutional change.”<sup>5</sup> The moot point is that the figure of an extraordinary leader remains central to the ‘motivation for redemptive politics’ that populist doctrine claims to achieve. In this context, Revelli observes that it is the populist leaders who guarantee – or claims to guarantee – the “public well-being” instead of the political institutions.<sup>6</sup> Even, Pierre Ostiguy’s socio-cultural definition of populism points to “personalism as a mode of decision-making.”<sup>7</sup>

The leader is not only central for populist mobilisation needed to challenge an incumbent in power, but also the populist leader remains the key provider of governance and welfare, once voted to power. So, understanding populist mobilisation through the agency of the leader, remains an interesting way of dissecting the nuances of the populist discourse in a democracy. In favour of studying populism as a political strategy of the leader, Weyland argues that “populism is best defined 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.”<sup>8</sup> Giusta, in his chapter on *Populism and Political Leadership* argues, that three aspects matters most for populist leadership “first, the authority they exercise tends to be personalistic rather than institutional. Second, populist leaders are persons who seek government power; and third, their relationship with followers is direct, unmediated and uninstitutionalised.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> C.A. Hartwell & T Devinney, “Populism, political risk, and pandemics: The challenges of political leadership for business in a post-COVID world,” *Journal of World Business*, 56, 101225, 2021

<sup>6</sup> M Revelli, *The new populism. Democracy stares into the Abyss*. Verso, 2019

<sup>7</sup> P Ostiguy, “Populism. A socio-cultural approach,” In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of populism* (pp. 73–97). Oxford University Press, 2017

<sup>8</sup> Kurt Weyland, Clarifying a contested concept: ‘populism’ in the study of Latin American politics,” *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), 2000: 1–22.

<sup>9</sup> Paolo Giusta, “Populism and Political Leadership,” In Antonio Maria Baggio, Maria-Gabriella Baldarelli & Samuel O. Idowu (Eds) *Populism and Accountability: Interdisciplinary Researches on Active Citizenship*, Springer, 2023

But the fact that populist appeal is becoming ubiquitous in democracies across the world, reducing it to just a political strategy of vote-catching by charismatic leaders might end up undervaluing or belittling a phenomenon as formidable and widespread as populism. Hence, ideational and socio-cultural motivation for the consolidation of the populist political appeal, also needs greater attention.<sup>10</sup> Cas Mudde has identified that populism as an ideology which has been defined ‘inclusively’ a “a body of normative and normative-related ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organization and purposes of society.” Even Michael Freedman has argued on similar lines that “ideology map the political and social worlds for us” However, making absolutists claims about populism as either a strategy or an ideology tends to underemphasise or overstress the nuanced dynamics that populism involves. It is very difficult to make blanket claims about populism as either a ‘panacea for democracy’ or ‘anti-theoretical to democracy’ or to project it as an ‘anti-liberal’ agenda. As Muller has highlighted, “evocations of populism often only seem to serve the purpose of criticizing something else.”

Hence, Aslanidis very rightly argues that going beyond the ideological baggage of pre-conceived assumptions, populism can be better understood through a discursive populist frame. He explains that “shifting away from essentialism, and acknowledging the continuous nature of populism, we can mitigate normative biases, and this is why this debate matters. A graded approach will reveal a more subtle and refined political landscape, where political parties are not easily classified as either populist or non-populist; it will demonstrate the fact that populist discursive elements are scattered across the ideological spectrum and that their intensity varies with time.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, it is a more helpful analytical tool to capture the complex nuances of populist politics. This study which has embarked with the objective of understanding the nature of populist appeal in Indian democracy. The central tenet for studying populism have been political leadership by looking at three select leaders in India- Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal. So, the theoretical premise or framework to start this study has been perceiving populism as a political strategy of the leader to galvanise public support for political gains. But in the course of the study, the research went beyond just looking at what the populist leaders offer to their political constituencies and how the people respond to it. The study through the public survey,

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<sup>10</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2014. “Populism and political leadership,” in R.

A. W. Rhodes and Paul T Hart (eds), *Oxford Handbook on Political Leadership*, Oxford University Press, 376–88.

<sup>11</sup> Paris Aslanidis, “Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective,” *Political Studies*, Volume 64, Issue 1, October 5, 2015

interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) attempted to understand whether populist ideas on politics, society, welfare and economy gains traction amongst the people.

This has taken the scope of this study further to understand whether the societal premise is conducive for a political leader to make populist political appeal to the people. In other words, whether populist narratives have become more than just a political strategy of these leaders to metamorphose into a discursive political discourse. The study has indeed revealed that populism more than just a political strategy and needs to be understood in the larger societal context in which populist ideas and assumptions are shared by the common people. Hence, this study, taking the argument posited by Aslanidis and others, acknowledges to look at populist appeal not only as a political strategy but a larger discursive discourse.

### **Main Findings of the Study**

This section would delve into the main substantive findings of this research. 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. 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. This study has taken up three leaders in India's contemporary politics-Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal, who are widely labelled as populists. In this study, both the supply and demand side of populism have been looked at, in order to have a more nuanced and multi-layered understanding of populism in India.

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 Modi, Mamata and Kejriwal before their constituencies. This study explored the

commonalities and divergences in the populist rhetoric of these leaders. And as these leaders are very successful in electoral politics till now, we also tried to understand what are the factors that makes their political appeal attractive to the people.

Also, 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 here. 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 leaders 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 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 reveals that one 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 Appeal**

- ***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. As discussed in the previous chapter, 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.<sup>12</sup> 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

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<sup>12</sup> India TV “Pseudo Secularism will not work in India anymore, says PM Modi in his victory speech,” 24 May, 2019, Political Speech, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGTYNBMhib8>

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 ‘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 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 the 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, arbiters 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 perceived 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 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,<sup>13</sup> conducting *Janata darbars*<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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

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<sup>13</sup> “Should Arvind Kejriwal Resign or Not, If Arrested: AAP To Seek Public Opinion,” *NDTV*, November 30, 2023,

<https://www.ndtv.com/delhi-news/should-arvind-kejriwal-resign-or-not-if-arrested-aap-to-seek-public-opinion-4620911>

<sup>14</sup> Pallavi Polanki, “Kejriwal's first Janata Darbar gave hope to some, disappointed others,” *Firstpost*, 11 January, 2014, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/kejriwals-first-janata-darbar-gave-hope-to-some-disappointed-others-1334843.html>

<sup>15</sup> Anup Verma, Ashish Srivastava, “Freebies route to power,” *The New Indian Express*, January 6, 2025, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2025/Jan/06/freebies-route-to-power>

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.<sup>16 17</sup> 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 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> The Indian Express, "In Modi backyard, AAP finds feet, for 'being different'," January 12, 2024,

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/in-modi-backyard-aap-finds-feet-for-being-different/>

<sup>17</sup> Mayura Janwalkar, "AAP opens account in Goa with two seats, mariner unseats former CM Alemao," *The Indian Express*, March 10, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/elections/aap-opens-account-in-go-a-with-two-seats-mariner-unseats-former-cm-alemao-7813688/>

Nikhil M Babu, "MCD poll win and entry into Gujarat Assembly boost AAP's national dreams," *The Hindu*, December 10, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assembly-elections-2022-a-boost-for-the-aaps-national-dreams/article66243450.ece>

<sup>18</sup> Ashutosh, "Why AAP can't crack general elections," *The Indian Express*, June 6, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/why-aap-cant-crack-general-elections-9374592/>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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

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<sup>19</sup> The lowest show for TMC has been the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in which the performance of the TMC plummeted to 22 seats as BJP sprung a massive surprise by winning 18 Lok Sabha seats from Bengal becoming the principal challenger of TMC in the state.

See Liz Mathew, Abantika Ghosh, Ravik Bhattacharya, "West Bengal results: With 18 seats, 40% vote share, BJP breathes down Trinamool Congress's neck," *The Indian Express*, May 24, 2019,

<https://indianexpress.com/elections/lok-sabha-election-results-with-18-seats-40-vote-share-bjp-trinamool-congress-pm-modi-mamata-banerjee-5745598/>

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 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**

Populism literature makes a strong argument that populist leader thrives in a party which has a weak organisational structure.<sup>20</sup> 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

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<sup>20</sup> N.W. Barber, “Populist leaders and political parties,” *German Law Journal* (2019), 20, pp. 129–140 doi:10.1017/glj.2019.9

Muhammad Nadeem Mirza, Haleema Azhar, “Why Democracies Give Rise to Populist Leaders?” *South Asian Journal of Contemporary Social Sciences*, 2021, 3 (1), pp.17-28

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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.

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<sup>21</sup> Seema Sirohi, "The social service wings of RSS played a big role in BJP's rise to power: Yale professor," *Scroll.in*, May 22, 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/808292/the-social-service-wings-of-rss-played-a-big-role-in-bjps-rise-to-power-yale-professor>

<sup>22</sup> Jayant Sriram, "AAP expels Yogendra Yadav, Prashant Bhushan," *The Hindu*, April 21, 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/AAP-expels-four-rebel-leaders/article60328892.ece>

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. Hence, 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 amply 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 start 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.

They 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.

## ANNEXURE-A

## Survey Questionnaire

## Understanding Public Perception on Populist leadership and Politics in India

## Notes for the respondents:

- *Please fill the questionnaire only if you are willing to participate in this survey. You need not take part in this under any obligation.*
- *This survey is solely for the purpose of doctoral research and the data will not be used for any other purpose and will not be shared with any other party.*
- *The survey is strictly confidential and identity of all respondents will be kept anonymous. Please do not mention your name anywhere in the questionnaire*
- *If you are not comfortable or unwilling to answer any question, please leave it blank.*

## Section A: General Background Details

QA1. How would you describe the place where you stay?

- a) Village b) Town c) City

QA2. Choose the age group (in years) you belong to:

- a) 18-30 b) 31-45 c) 46-60 d) 60 and above

QA3. Gender:

- a) Male b) Female c) Others

QA4. I believe you had some opportunity of going to school. Could you tell us up to which level did you study?

- a) No formal education b) Upto Class 10 c) Upto Class 12 d) Upto college  
e) Above College f) Others

QA5. May I ask you what do you do for your livelihood?

.....

QA6. What is your approximate monthly family income (local currency)?

- a) Below 5000/- b) 5000- 10,000/- c) 10,000-25,000/-  
d) 25,000- 50,000/- e) Above 50,000/- f) Above 1 Lakh

QA7. What is your religion?

- a) Hindu b) Muslim c) Christian d) Sikh e) Buddhist/neo-Buddhist  
f) Jain g) Parsi h) No religion i) Others (*specify*)\_\_\_\_\_

QA8a. If the respondent is Hindu- Which caste group/ Jati/Biradhri you would identify yourself with?

.....

QA8b. What caste group do you belong to - SC, ST, OBC or General?

a) SC b) ST c) OBC d) General

QA8c. (*If respondent is Muslim*) Which sect are you from - Shia or Sunni?

a) Shia b) Sunni c) Others (*specify*) \_\_\_\_\_ d) CS e) NR. f) NA

QA9. Hope you get some chance to keep yourself updated about the daily news. How regularly do you do the following – daily, sometimes, rarely or never?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Daily	No response
Watch news on television?	1	2	3	4	8
Read the newspaper/s?	1	2	3	4	8
Listen to news on radio?	1	2	3	4	8
Read news on internet?	1	2	3	4	8

QA10. Hope you have access to some social media platform. How often do you use the following - many times a day, once or twice a day, some days a week, some days a month, very rarely or never? (Any other social media in use?)

	No Account	Never	Rarely	Few days a month	Few days a week	Once or twice a day	Many times a day	No response
Facebook	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Twitter	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
WhatsApp	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Instagram	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Youtube	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

### Set for survey in West Bengal

#### Section B: Party Support

QB1. I assume you have voted for some party in the last election? If yes, why did you vote for that particular party?

- **A. At State level:**

- a) You support the ideology of the party b) You support the topmost leader of the party
- c) You feel the party does good work for people d) You didn't find an alternative e) Don't know f) No Response g) other.....

- **B. At National level:**

- a) You support the ideology of the party b) You support the topmost leader of the party
- c) You feel the party is good for governance d) You didn't find an alternative e) Don't know f) No Response g) other.....

QB2. Whenever you think about your political preference, do you feel closer to the party or the leader?

- **A. At State level**

- a) Party b) Leader c) both d) None e) Don't Know f) No Response

- **B. At National level**

- a) Party b) Leader c) both d) None e) Don't Know f) No Response

QB3. Had you voted for the same party if:

- **A. Some other leader had been the CM face/top leader of the party of your choice in your state in 2021 election?**

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

- **B. Some other leader had been the PM face/top leader of the party at national level in 2019 Lok Sabha election?**

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

#### Section C: Leader and party

QC1. **A.** Currently TMC is the ruling party in your state. As we all know that Mamata Banerjee is the supreme leader of TMC and 2021 Bengal elections were fought on a personalised slogan like *Bangla Nijer Meye kei chaye*. Do you think that TMC would have won the elections without Mamata as its CM face?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

**B.** Currently BJP is the ruling party at the Centre. As we all know that Narendra Modi is the supreme leader of BJP now and both 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections were fought on a personalised slogans like *Jeetaga to Modi hi, Har Har Modi Ghar ghar Modi, Mai bhi Chowkidar* amongst others. Do you think that BJP would have won the 2014 and 2019 national elections without Modi as its PM face?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC2. Apart from Mamata, are there any other leader whom you consider to be a powerful leader with a mass base who can match Mamata Banerjee's political stature at the state level?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC2a. If yes, can you please name the leader?

.....

QC3. Apart from Modi, are there any other leader whom you consider to be a powerful leader with a mass base that can match the political stature of Modi at the national level?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC3a. If yes, can you please name the leader?

.....

QC4. We keep hearing in the news about organisational changes being made in the TMC before and especially after the 2021 state elections and ahead of 2024 national elections. Do you think that all these decisions in TMC are taken solely by Mamata or collectively by party members as an organisation?

- a) Taken solely by Mamata b) Taken by Mamata with leader/s close to Mamata c) Taken collectively by entire party leadership d) Don't know e) No Response

QC5. We keep hearing in the news about organisational changes being made in the BJP before and after national and state elections. Also, CMs of BJP ruled states are chosen from BJP Delhi headquarters. Do you think that all these decisions in BJP are taken by Narendra Modi, Amit Shah or collectively by party members as an organisation?

- a) Taken solely by Modi b) Taken by Amit Shah and Modi c) Taken by the Party President c) Taken collectively by entire party leadership d) Don't know e) No Response

QC6. Do you think Mamata's strong hold over TMC is helping it to win the elections in Bengal?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC6a. If yes, can you elaborate

how.....

.....

.....

QC7. Do you think Modi’s strong hold over BJP is helping it to win the national elections?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don’t Know e) No Response

Q7a. If yes, can you elaborate

how.....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

QC8. What factor do you think have contributed the most:

- **In TMC’s thumping victory 2021 elections.?**

- a) Due to Mamata’s popularity b) Due to BJP’s organisational weakness in the state c) Due to lack of popular leadership face in the opposition d) Due to weakening of other opposition forces like CPM and Congress e) Due to BJP’s image as an outsider or Hindi-belt party f) Due to limited popularity of Modi in Bengal g) Due to BJP’s constant political attack on Mamata Banerjee that backfired h) Any other factor.....

- **In increase in BJP’s seat share in Bengal in 2019 and 2021 elections?**

- a) Due to Modi’s popularity b) Due to BJP’s strong organisational and money power c) Due to TMC’s defections and anti-incumbency d) Due to marginalisation of other opposition forces like CPI(M) and Congress e) Any other factor.....

QC9. What factor do you think have contributed the most in BJP’s defeat in Bengal in the 2021 assembly elections. (multiple)

- a) Due to limited popularity of Modi b) Due to BJP’s lack of popular local leadership face in Bengal c) Due to TMC’s organisational strength d) Due to Mamata’s unmatched popularity in the state e) Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 second wave in between elections f) Don’t Know g) No Response h) g) Any other factor.....

**Section D: Leader and Governmental performance**

QD1. Mamata government’s welfare schemes like *Duare Sarkar, Shyastho Sathi, Kanyashree, Lakshmir Bhandar* and others are seen as a major factor benefitting TMC in the election. Have you heard of these schemes?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don’t Know e) No Response

QD2. Central government’s welfare policies that includes Swachh Bharat Yogna, Ujjwala Yojna, Jan Dhan Yojna, Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojna, Ayushman Bharat and others are seen as a major factor benefitting BJP in the 2019 national elections as well as many state elections. Have you heard of these schemes?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don’t Know e) No Response

QD3. What are the Central and state schemes about which you have heard the most?

.....  
 .....

QD4. Do you receive welfare benefits through government schemes:

- **A. From the state government?**
  - a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response
- **B. From the Central government?**
  - a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QD4a. If yes, can you name some schemes and the benefits that you have received?

- a) From state.....  
.....
- b) From Centre.....  
.....

QD5. If you feel that the welfare schemes are beneficial, then whom do you want to give credit for the welfare benefits and government performance?

- **A. For state:**
  - a) Mamata Banerjee b) Abhishek Banerjee c) some other leader d) West Bengal government e) TMC party f) Local TMC leader g) No Response
- **B. For Centre:**
  - a) Modi b) Amit Shah c) some other BJP leader d) Central government e) BJP party f) Local BJP leader g) TMC h) Mamata Banerjee i) State government j) No Response

QD6. If you think that the welfare schemes are not good, inadequate or schemes are not working, then who do you think is responsible for that?

- **A. For State:**
  - a) Mamata Banerjee b) Abhishek Banerjee c) some other leader d) West Bengal government e) TMC party f) Local TMC leader g) No Response
- **B. For Centre:**
  - a) Modi b) Amit Shah c) some other BJP leader d) Central government e) BJP party f) Local BJP leader g) TMC h) Mamata Banerjee i) State government j) No Response

QD7. Do you think the governmental performance would have been same:

- **A. Without Mamata Banerjee as the CM in the state?**
  - a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response
- **B. Without Modi as the PM at the Centre?**
  - a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

**Section E: Leader and accountability**

QE1. Corruption charges on many state ministers and members of the ruling party in Bengal are in the news. Do you consider the concerned minister only to be responsible for his or her conduct or you feel the CM is also to be held responsible?

- a) Only the minister is involved b) CM also to be held responsible c) Entire government to be held responsible d) CM shouldn't be held responsible e) Entire government should be held responsible c) Not Sure

QE2. Have you ever seen or heard

- **A. Mamata Banerjee in-person in some public meeting?**

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

- **B. Narendra Modi in-person in some public meeting?**

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE3. Have you heard/seen/read:

- **A. Mamata's interaction with the media?**

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

- **B. Modi's interaction with the media?**

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE4. Are you satisfied with the communication done by these political leaders with the media?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE5. Do you think that these political leaders should be more answerable to the public and media for the key issues and challenges of his/her government?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE6. In our democratic system, an elected government is responsible to the legislature. Do you follow Vidhan Sabha or Parliament debates on the TV sometimes?

- a) Regularly b) Sometimes c) rarely d) Not at all e) Don't Know f) No Response

QE7. Let's say a policy like universal health insurance or distribution of student credit card, that is expected to be popular amongst wide sections of people. Do you think the policy need not wait for debate and discussion in the legislature as it causes delay in implementation of the policy?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE8. Do you feel that Mamata Banerjee frequently participates in legislative debates?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE9. Do you feel that Modi frequently participates in parliamentary debates?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE10. In our day-to-day politics, we see that the legislators are strictly voting in every issue on the lines dictated by their party leader? Do you think that keeping firm control over the legislators does the following:

- a) Is good for political stability of the government b) It harms legislative freedom of legislators as individual public representative c) Both d) None e) No Response f) Others.....

QE11. Both in West Bengal and at the Centre, the ruling government has a thumping legislative/parliamentary majority and can pass any law in the legislature. Even in such situation, ideal democratic practice warrants that the opposition parties should be consulted for initiating any major governmental policy. Do you think the following: (Multiple ticking)

- a) The government consults the opposition on major issues b) The government doesn't consult the opposition c) As the government has the majority, the government doesn't need to consult the opposition d) The government should consult the opposition e) The opposition doesn't cooperate with the government f) Don't know g) No Response h) others.....

QE12. The ruling party, TMC, often claims to be better suited to protect the interest of the state as the party originated in the state. Do you think that a regional party is best suited to protect the interests of your state?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE13. If yes or no, why do you feel so?

.....

QE14. Do you think BJP, which is often called a party of North India/ national party coming from outside the state, will understand the problems of your state?

- a) No, as it is largely a north Indian/Hindi belt party b) No, because it wants to control Bengal from Delhi c) No, because BJP doesn't have a strong Bengal-based leadership who can lead the party and understands the problem of the state d) Yes, a national party can be a more responsive and effective ruling party in West Bengal as in many states e) Not Sure f) Don't Know g) No Response

QE15. Many a time, the Central government is accused of price rise, unemployment and slow economic growth. Do you consider the concerned minister only is to be held responsible for his or her conduct or you feel the PM is also to be held responsible?

- a) Only the minister is involved b) PM also to be held responsible c) Entire government to be held responsible d) PM shouldn't be held responsible e) Entire government should not be held responsible c) Not Sure

QE16. Whom do you give more credit for the work done during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- a) State government b) Central government c) Both d) None e) Don't Know f) NR

QE17. Whom do you hold more responsible for the deaths and sufferings during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- a) State government b) Central government c) Both d) None e) Don't Know f) NR

QE18. Do you think leadership played a role in Covid management?

- a) Yes b) No c) Don't Know

QE19a. Which leader do you think should be credited for the work?

- a) Mamata b) Modi c) Mamata in Bengal d) Modi at national level e) CMs of all states  
f) Both Central and state governments g) None h) Don't Know i) NR

## Section F: Societal Issues

QF1. The last state election in 2021 saw a number of heated political debates on insider versus outsider. Do you think outsiders and migrants are real threats to state's interest?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF1a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF2. Do you think, in India, the majority religious community has been undermined by the national governments in the past?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF2a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF3. Do you think in West Bengal, the minority religious community has been favoured by the ruling party?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF3a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF4. Do you think that in India the majority Hindu community should have greater rights than the minority communities?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF5a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF6. Do you perceive the minority communities a threat to the society or national interest?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF6a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF7. Who do you think is an ideal leader in a democracy

- a) One who acts on the will of the majority  
b) One who suppresses and corners the rights of the minority  
c) One who despite commanding the support of the majority, protects the minority

d) One who should protect the minority even it that requires going against the majority demands sometimes.

e) Don't Know

f) No response

QF8. There is an ongoing debate on whether such welfare measures that includes cash transfers, free electricity, free water, free food, free healthcare, free education, free household goods are truly welfare measures or only freebies used for attracting votes. What do you think about it?

a) These are essential welfare goods that benefit the poor b) Government should stop these schemes as it makes people lazy c) These schemes should be stopped as it drains crucial public money d) Some are essential welfare measures while others are freebies. e) Don't Know f) No Response

QF9. Do you think the following: (Multiple ticking)

a) Elites in the society are immoral and corrupt

b) A strong political leader should punish the corrupt elite

c) All political leaders are part of the elite

d) Elites are threats to national interest and poor

e) Elites comprises of many sections of people who worked their way upward and all are not corrupt or immoral

f) Don't Know

g) NR

QF10. It is many a times discussed in public debate that India's slow pace of decision-making delays developmental work. Do you think we need strong leadership leads for efficient governance?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF11. Do you think in a democracy concerns of various sections of people should be considered in the decision making process even if it delays the decisions?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF12. The ruling party comes to power by winning the mandate of the people. Do you think elected governments should act against the spirit of the constitution as they have the popular mandate to rule?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

If yes or no, can you elaborate on this.....

QF13. Do you think that the judiciary should intervene if the elected government acts against the constitutional guidelines?

a) Yes, it is the duty of the judiciary to check the misuse of governmental power b) No, the judiciary as a non-elected body should not intervene in the functioning of a democratically elected government c) Not Sure d) No Response

QF14. Do you think popular demands should be prioritised over constitutional guidelines in a democracy?

a) Not under any circumstances b) Yes it should be sidelined as in a democracy popular will is supreme c) Only if the demand is extremely important for the benefit of the people. d) A proper procedure should be followed even if constitutional guidelines have to be sidelined to accommodate popular demands.

### Set for survey in Delhi

#### Section B: Party Support

QB1. I assume you have voted for some party in the last election? If yes, why did you vote for that particular party?

- **A. At State level:**

a) You support the ideology of the party b) You support the topmost leader of the party  
c) You feel the party is good for governance d) You didn't find an alternative e) Don't know f) No Response g) other.....

- **B. At National level:**

a) You support the ideology of the party b) You support the topmost leader of the party  
c) You feel the party is good for governance d) You didn't find an alternative e) Don't know f) No Response g) other.....

QB2. Do you feel closer to the party or the leader?

- **A. At State level**

a) Party b) Leader c) both d) None e) Don't Know f) No Response

- **B. At National level**

a) Party b) Leader c) both d) None e) Don't Know f) No Response

QB3. Had you voted for the same party if:

- **A. Some other leader had been the CM face of the party in your state in 2020 election?**

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

- **B. Some other leader had been the PM face of the party at national level in 2019 Lok Sabha election?**

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

### Section C: Leader and party

QC1. **A.** Currently AAP, a relatively new party is ruling in your state for the last 10 years. As we all know that Arvind Kejriwal is the supreme leader of AAP and the party fights the Delhi state elections mainly based on his popularity, do you think that AAP would have won the elections in Delhi without Kejriwal as its leadership face?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

**B.** Currently BJP is the ruling party at the Centre. As we all know that Narendra Modi is the supreme leader of BJP now and both 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections were fought on a personalised slogans like *Jeetaga to Modi hi, Har Har Modi Ghar ghar Modi, Mai bhi Chowkidar* amongst others, do you think that BJP would have won the 2014 and 2019 national elections without Modi as its PM face?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC2. Apart from Kejriwal, are there any other leader whom you consider to be a powerful leader with a mass base who can match the political stature of Kejriwal at the state level in Delhi?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC2a. If yes, can you please name the leader?

.....

QC3. Apart from Modi, are there any other leader whom you consider to be a powerful leader with a mass base who can match the stature of Modi at the national level?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC3a. If yes, can you please name the leader?

.....

QC4. In the early years after the formation of the party, notable leaders of AAP like Prashant Bhusan and Yogendra Yadav has left the party with speculations of differences with Kejriwal. Do you think Kejriwal has with time got absolute control of his party and all decisions in AAP is taken solely by Kejriwal or collectively by party members as an organisation?

a) Taken solely by Kejriwal b) Taken by leader/s close to Kejriwal c) Taken collectively by party leadership d) Don't know e) No Response

QC4a. We keep hearing in the news about organisational changes being made in the BJP before and after national and state elections. Also, CMs of BJP ruled states are chosen from BJP Delhi headquarters. Do you think that all these decisions in BJP are taken by Modi-Shah or collectively by party members as an organisation?

- a) Taken solely by Modi b) Taken by Amit Shah and Modi c) Taken by Party President  
d) Taken collectively by party leadership e) Don't know f) No Response

QC5. Do you think Kejriwal's strong hold over AAP is helping it to win the elections in the state?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC5a. If yes, can you elaborate how.....

QC6. Do you think Modi's strong hold over BJP is helping it to win the national elections?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

Q6a. If yes, can you elaborate how.....

QC7. What factor do you think have contributed the most:

• **In AAP's thumping victory in 2020 elections.?**

- a) Due to Kejriwal's personal popularity b) Due to his welfare model that includes free quality education, free water and electricity amongst others c) Due to lack of popular leadership face in the state BJP d) Due to marginalisation of the once powerful Congress party in the state e) Due to voter's clear choice of AAP for the state and for BJP at national level f) AAP led by Kejriwal's clean image g) Due to opposition's constant political attack on Kejriwal that backfired h) Any other factor.....

• **In BJP's victory in Delhi in 2019 elections?**

- a) Due to Modi's popularity as PM b) Due to BJP's strong organisational and money power c) Due to voter's preference for Modi led BJP at national level d) Due to marginalisation of other opposition forces like Congress e) Due to AAP's inability to project itself as a national alternative f) Satisfaction with Central government's performance g) Lack of support for Kejriwal as PM face.

QC8. What factor (s) do you think have contributed the most in BJP's defeat in Delhi in the 2020 state elections.

- a) Due to limited popularity of Modi in the state b) Due to BJP's lack of popular local leadership face in Delhi c) Due to AAP's organisational strength d) Due to Kejriwal's unmatched popularity in the state e) Due to Kejriwal government's performance in the state f) Don't Know g) No Response h) g) Any other factor.....

**Section D: Leader and Governmental Performance**

QD1. Kejriwal government's welfare measures starting from free electricity, free ration, free water, quality education in government schools, Mohalla clinics and others are seen as major factors benefitting AAP in the state election. Have you heard of these welfare measures?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QD2. Central government's welfare schemes starting from Swachh Bharat Yojna, Ujjwala Yojna, Jan Dhan Yojna, Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojna, Ayushman Bharat and others are seen as a major factor benefitting BJP in the 2019 national elections as well as many state elections. Have you heard of these schemes?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QD3. What are the Central and state schemes about which you have heard the most?

.....  
 .....

QD4. Do you receive welfare benefits:

- **A. From the state government?**

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

- **B. From the Central government?**

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QD4a. If yes, can you name some schemes and the benefits that you have received?

a) From state.....

b) From Centre.....

QD5. Do you feel such welfare goods have improved the lives of the people in Delhi?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QD6. If you feel that the welfare schemes are beneficial and governmental performance is good, then whom do you want to give credit for the welfare benefits and government performance?

- **A. For the state:**

a) Arvind Kejriwal b) Manish Sisodia c) some other leader..... d) Delhi government  
 e) AAP party f) Local AAP leader g) No Response

- **B. For the Centre:**

a) Modi b) Amit Shah c) some other BJP leader d) Central government e) BJP party f)  
 Local BJP leader g) AAP h) Arvind Kejriwal i) State government j)No Response

QD7. If you are not satisfied with the government services, who do you think is responsible for the non-delivery of welfare benefits and unsatisfactory government performance?

- **A. For the state:**

a) Arvind Kejriwal b) Manish Sisodia c) cabinet ministers d) Bureaucracy e) some other  
 leader..... f) Delhi government g) AAP party h) Local AAP leader i) No Response

- **B. For the Centre:**

a) Modi b) Amit Shah c) some other BJP leader d) Central government e) BJP party f)  
 Local BJP leader g) AAP h) Arvind Kejriwal i) State government j)No Response

QD8. There is an ongoing debate on whether such welfare measures that includes cash transfers, free electricity, free water, free food, free healthcare, free education, free household goods are truly welfare measures or only freebies used for attracting votes. What do you think about it?

- a) These are essential welfare goods that benefit the poor
- b) Government should stop these schemes as it makes people lazy
- c) These schemes should be stopped as it drains crucial public money
- d) Some are essential welfare measures while others are freebies.
- e) Don't Know
- f) No Response

### **Section E: Leader and accountability**

QE1. Corruption charges on some members of AAP government are in the news. Do you consider the concerned minister only to be responsible for his or her conduct or you feel the CM is also to be held responsible?

- a) Only the minister is involved
- b) CM also to be held responsible
- c) Entire government to be held responsible
- d) CM shouldn't be held responsible
- e) Entire government should be held responsible
- c) Not Sure

QE2. Have you ever seen or heard:

#### **A. Arvind Kejriwal in-person in some public meeting?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not Sure
- d) Don't Know
- e) No Response

#### **B. Modi in-person in some public meeting?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not Sure
- d) Don't Know
- e) No Response

QE3. Have you heard/seen/read:

#### **A. Kejriwal's interaction with the media?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not Sure
- d) Don't Know
- e) No Response

#### **B. Modi's interaction with the media?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not Sure
- d) Don't Know
- e) No Response

QE4. Are you satisfied with the communication done by these political leaders with the media?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not Sure
- d) Don't Know
- e) No Response

QE5. Do you think that these political leaders should be more answerable to the public and media for the key issues and challenges of his/her government?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not Sure
- d) Don't Know
- e) No Response

QE6. In our democratic system, an elected government is responsible to the legislature. Do you follow Vidhan Sabha or Parliamentary debates on the TV sometimes?

- a) Regularly
- b) Sometimes
- c) rarely
- d) Not at all
- e) Don't Know
- f) No Response

QE7. Let’s say, there is a proposal of free electricity or free water that is expected to be popular amongst wide sections of people. In such case, do you think implementation of such policies need not wait for debate and discussion in the legislature as it causes delay in implementation of the policy?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don’t Know e) No Response

QE8. Do you feel that Arvind Kejriwal frequently participates in legislative debates?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don’t Know e) No Response

QE9. Do you feel that Modi frequently participates in parliamentary debates?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don’t Know e) No Response

QE10. In our day-to-day politics, we see that the legislators are strictly voting on every issue on the lines dictated by their party leader? Do you think that keeping firm control over the legislators does the following:

- a) Is good for political stability of the government b) it harms legislative freedom of legislators as individual public representative c) Both d) None e) No Response f) Others.....

QE11. At the national Parliament and also in Delhi State Legislative Assembly, the ruling government has a thumping parliamentary/legislative majority and can pass any law in the house. In such situation, do you think the following: (Multiple ticking)

- a) The government consults the opposition on major issues b) The government doesn’t consult the opposition c) As the government has the majority, the government doesn’t need to consult the opposition
- d) The government should consult the opposition e) The opposition doesn’t cooperate with the government f) Don’t know g) No Response
- h) others.....

QE12. The ruling party, AAP, often claims to be better suited to protect the interest of the state as the party originated in the state. Do you think that a regional party is best suited to protect the interests of your state?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don’t Know e) No Response

QE12a. If yes or no, why do you feel so?

.....

QE13. Do you think that the autonomy of the Delhi government to do its work is limited due to the role of the Lieutenant Governor and the recently passed The Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act (2021)?

- a) Yes, Centre it curtails the powers of state government b) No, it is for better administration and governance of Delhi e) Not Sure f) Don’t Know g) No Response

QE14. Many a times, the Central government is accused of price rise, unemployment and slow economic growth. Do you consider the concerned minister only to be responsible for his or her conduct or you feel the PM is also to be held responsible?

- a) Only the minister is involved b) PM also to be held responsible c) Entire government to be held responsible d) PM shouldn't be held responsible e) Entire government should be held responsible c) Not Sure

QE15. Delhi suffered a huge oxygen crisis in the COVID-19 second wave. Whom do you give more credit for the relief work done during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- a) State government b) Central government c) Both d) None e) Don't Know f) NR

QE16. Whom do you hold more responsible for the deaths and sufferings during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- a) State government b) Central government c) Both d) None e) Don't Know f) NR

QE17. Do you think leadership played an important role in Covid management?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE18. Which leader do you think should be credited for the work

- a) Kejriwal b) Modi c) Kejriwal in Delhi d) Modi at national level e) CMs of all states f) Both Central and state governments g) None h) Don't Know i) NR

## Section F: Societal Issues

QF1. Do you think migrants like Rohingyas or Bangladeshis are threat to state's and nation's interest?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF1a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF2. Do you think people from other states who migrate to Delhi are threat to state's interest? (inter-state migration)

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF2a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF3. Do you think, in India the majority religious community has been undermined by the national governments in the past?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF3a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF4. Do you think in Delhi, the minority religious community has been unduly favoured by any party?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response f).....

QF5. There has been a communal riot in Delhi in February 2020 in the backdrop of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests. Who do you think was responsible for it?

- a) Political parties were responsible
- b) Protesters were responsible
- c) Minority community was responsible
- d) Majority community was responsible
- e) Don't know
- f) No Response

QF5b. Please elaborate why do you feel so.....

QF6. Do you think that in India the majority Hindu community should have greater rights than the minority communities?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF6a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF7. Do you perceive the minority communities to be violent or a threat to the society or national interest?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF7a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF8. Who do you think is an ideal leader in a democracy

- a) One who acts on the will of the majority
- b) One who suppresses and corners the rights of the minority
- c) One who despite commanding the support of the majority, protects the minority
- d) One who should protect the minority even it that requires going against the majority demands sometimes.
- e) Don't Know
- f) No response

QF9. There is an ongoing debate on whether such welfare measures that includes cash transfers, free electricity, free water, free food, free healthcare, free education, free household goods are truly welfare measures or only freebies used for attracting votes. What do you think about it?

- a) These are essential welfare goods that benefit the poor b) Government should stop these schemes as it makes people lazy c) These schemes should be stopped as it drains crucial public money d) Some are essential welfare measures while others are freebies. e) Don't Know f) No Response

QF10. Do you think the following: (Multiple ticking)

- a) Elites in the society are immoral and corrupt
- b) A strong political leader should punish the corrupt elite
- c) All political leaders are part of the elite
- d) Elites are threats to national interest and poor
- e) Elites comprises of many sections of people who worked their way upward and all are not corrupt or immoral
- f) Don't Know
- g) NR

QF11. It is many a times discussed in public debate that India's slow pace of decision-making delays developmental work. Do you think we need strong leadership leads for efficient governance?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF12. Do you think in a democracy concerns of various sections of people should be considered in the decision-making process even if it delays the decisions?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF13. The ruling party comes to power by winning the mandate of the people. Do you think elected governments should act against the spirit of the constitution as they have the popular mandate to rule?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

If yes or no, can you elaborate on this.....

QF14. Do you think that the judiciary should intervene if the elected government acts against the constitutional guidelines?

- a) Yes, it is the duty of the judiciary to check the misuse of governmental power b) No, the judiciary as a non-elected body should not intervene in the functioning of a democratically elected government c) Not Sure d) No Response

QF15. Do you think popular demands should be prioritised over constitutional guidelines in a democracy?

- a) Not under any circumstances b) Yes it should be sidelined as in a democracy popular will is supreme c) Only if the demand is extremely important for the benefit of the people. d) A proper procedure should be followed even if constitutional guidelines have to be sidelined to accommodate popular demands.

### Set for Survey in Uttar Pradesh

#### Section B: Party Support

QB1. I assume to have voted for some party in the last election? If yes, why did you vote for that particular party?

- **A. At State level:**

a) You support the ideology of the party b) You support the topmost leader of the party c) You feel the party does good work for people d) You didn't find an alternative e) Don't know f) No Response g) other.....

- **B. At National level:**

a) You support the ideology of the party b) You support the topmost leader of the party c) You feel the party is good for governance d) You didn't find an alternative e) Don't know f) No Response g) other.....

QB2. Whenever you think about your political preference, do you feel closer to the party or the leader?

- **A. At State level**

a) Party b) Leader c) both d) None e) Don't Know f) No Response

- **B. At National level**

a) Party b) Leader c) both d) None e) Don't Know f) No Response

QB3. Had you voted for the same party if:

- **A. Some other leader had been the CM face/top leader of the party of your choice in your state in 2022 election?**

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

- **B. Some other leader had been the PM face/top leader of the party at national level in 2019 Lok Sabha election?**

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

#### Section C: Leader and party

QC1. Currently BJP is the ruling party at the Centre. As we all know that Narendra Modi is the topmost leader of BJP now and the 2014, 2019 Lok Sabha elections are fought on a personalised slogans like *Jeetaga to Modi hi, Har Har Modi Ghar ghar Modi, Mai bhi Chowkidar, Modi ki guarantee* amongst others. Do you think that BJP would have won the 2014 and 2019 national elections without Modi as its PM face?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC2. Apart from Modi, are there any other leader whom you consider to be a powerful leader with a mass base that can match the stature of Modi at the national level today?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC2a. If yes, can you please name the leader?

.....

QC3. We keep hearing in the news about organisational changes being made in the BJP before and after elections. Also, the CMs of BJP ruled states are chosen from BJP Delhi headquarters. Do you think that all these decisions in BJP are taken by Modi-Shah or collectively by party members as an organisation?

- a) Taken solely by Modi b) Taken by Amit Shah and Modi c) Taken by the BJP President c) Taken collectively by entire party leadership d) Don't know e) No Response

QC4. Do you think Modi's strong hold over BJP is helping it to win the national elections?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QC4a. If yes, can you elaborate how.....

.....  
 .....

QC5. What factor do you think have contributed the most:

• **In BJP's thumping victory in national and Vidhan Sabha elections since 2014 in UP?**

- a) Mainly due to Modi's popularity b) Due to Yogi Adityanath's popularity c) Due to BJP's organisational strength in the state c) Due to lack of popular leadership face in the opposition d) Due to support from RSS, Hindu Mahasabha, Bajrang Dal and other Sangh organisations e) Due to BJP's political ideology and policies f) Due to BJP's greater financial resources g) Due to corruption charges on opposition leaders h) Any other factor.....

QC6. What factor do you think have contributed the most in losing of Samajwadi Party in UP in the 2017 and 2022 elections.

- a) Due to limited popularity and inadequate political strategy of Akhilesh Yadav b) Due to the absence of Mulayam Singh Yadav from UP politics c) Due to BJP's organisational strength d) Due to Modi's unmatched popularity in the state e) Due to CM Yogi Adityanath's unmatched popularity in the state f) Don't Know g) No Response h) g) Any other factor.....

**Section D: Leader and Governmental performance**

QD1. Yogi Adityanath government's welfare schemes and policies are seen as a major factor benefitting BJP in the election. Have you heard of these schemes and policies?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QD2. Central government's welfare schemes starting from Swachh Bharat Yagna, Ujjwala Yojna, Jan Dhan Yojna, Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojna, Ayushman Bharat and others are seen as a major factor benefitting BJP in the 2019 national elections as well as many state elections. Have you heard of these schemes?

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QD2a. What are the Central and state schemes and policies about which you have heard the most?

.....  
 .....

QD3. Do you receive welfare benefits:

• **A. From the state government?**

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

• **B. From the Central government?**

a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QD4. If yes, can you name some schemes and the benefits that you have received?

a) From state.....

b) From Centre.....

QD5. If you feel that the welfare schemes are beneficial, then whom do you want to give credit for the welfare benefits and government's performance?

• **A. For state:**

a) Narendra Modi b) Yogi Adityanath c) some other leader d) UP government e) BJP party f) Local party leadership g) No Response

• **B. For Centre:**

a) Modi b) Amit Shah c) some other BJP leader d) Central government e) BJP party f) Local party leader g) State government i) No Response

QD6. If you think that the welfare schemes are not good or schemes are not working, then who do you think is responsible for that?

• **A. For State:**

a) Narendra Modi b) Yogi Adityanath c) some other leader d) UP government e) BJP f) Local party leader g) No Response

• **B. For Centre:**

a) Modi b) Amit Shah c) some other BJP leader d) Central government e) BJP party f) Local party leader g) Yogi Adityanath h) State government i) No Response

QD7. Do you think the governmental performance would have been same:

- **A. Without Yogi Adityanath as the CM in the state?**
  - a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response
- **B. Without Modi as the PM at the Centre?**
  - a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

### Section E: Leader and Accountability

QE1. Have you ever seen or heard Narendra Modi in person in some public meeting?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE2. Have you heard/seen/read Modi's interaction with the media?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE3. Are you happy with the communication done by PM Modi with the media?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE4. Do you think national leaders should be more answerable for the key issues and challenges of his government?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE5. In our democratic system, an elected government is responsible to the legislature. Do you follow Parliamentary debates on the TV sometimes?

- a) Regularly b) Sometimes c) rarely d) Not at all e) Don't Know f) No Response

QE6. Let's take an example of legislations like Women Reservation Bill which is expected to be popular amongst sections of people. Do you think such popular policy proposals need not wait for debate and discussion in the legislature as it causes delay in implementation of the policy?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE7. Do you feel that Modi frequently participates in parliamentary debates?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QE8. In our day-to-day politics, we see that the legislators are strictly voting on every issue on lines dictated by their party leader? Do you think that keeping firm control over the legislators does the following:

- a) Is good for political stability of the government b) it harms legislative freedom of legislators as individual public representative c) Both d) None e) No Response f) Others.....

QE9. Both in UP and at the Centre, the ruling government has a thumping legislative/parliamentary majority and can pass any law in the house. Even in such situation, ideal democratic culture warrants that the opposition parties should be consulted for initiating any major governmental policy. Do you think the following: (Multiple ticking)

- a) The government consults the opposition on major issues b) The government doesn't consult the opposition c) As the government has the majority, the government doesn't need to consult the opposition d) The government should consult the opposition e) The opposition doesn't cooperate with the government f) Don't know g) No Response h) others.....

QE10. Many a time, the Central government is accused of price rise, unemployment, and slow economic growth. Do you consider the concerned minister only to be responsible for his or her conduct or you feel the PM is also to be held responsible?

- a) Only the minister is involved b) PM also to be held responsible c) Entire government to be held responsible d) PM shouldn't be held responsible e) Entire government should be held responsible c) Not Sure

QE11. Whom do you give more credit for the work done during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- a) State government b) Central government c) Both d) None e) Don't Know f) No Response

QE12. Whom do you hold more responsible for the deaths and sufferings during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- a) State government b) Central government c) Both d) None e) Don't Know f) No Response

QE13. Do you think leadership played a role in COVID-19 management?

- a) Yes b) No c) Don't Know d) No Response

QE14. If yes, which leader do you think should be credited for the work?

- a) Yogi Adityanath b) Modi c) Yogi in UP d) Modi at national level e) CMs of all states f) Both Central and state governments g) None h) Don't Know i) No Response

## Section F: Societal Issues

QF1. Recent elections saw a number of heated political debates on presence of outsiders and Bangladeshi migrants and Rohingyas in the country. Do you think outsiders and migrants they are threat to country and society's interest?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF1a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF2. Do you think, in India the majority religious community has been undermined by the national governments in the past?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF2a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF3. Do you think in the past, the minority religious community has been unduly favoured by the governments?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF3a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF4. Do you think that in India the majority Hindu community should have greater rights than the minority communities?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF5a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF6. Do you perceive the minority communities a threat to the society or national interest?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF6a. If yes or no, please elaborate why.....

QF7. Who do you think is an ideal leader in a democracy

- a) One who acts on the will of the majority  
b) One who suppresses and corners the rights and interests of the minority  
c) One who despite commanding the support of the majority, protects the minority  
d) One who should protect the minority even if that requires going against the majority demands sometimes.  
e) Don't Know  
f) No response

QF8. There is an ongoing debate on whether such welfare measures that includes cash transfers, free electricity, free water, free food, free healthcare, free education, free household goods are truly welfare measures or only freebies used for attracting votes. What do you feel about it?

- a) These are essential welfare goods that benefit the poor b) Government should stop these schemes as it makes people lazy c) These schemes should be stopped as it drains crucial public money d) Some are essential welfare measures while others are freebies.  
e) Don't Know f) No Response

QF9. Do you think the following:

- a.) Elites in the society are immoral and corrupt  
b.) A strong political leader should punish the corrupt elite  
c.) All political leaders are part of the elite  
d.) Elites are threats to national interest and poor

- e.) Elites comprises of many sections of people who worked their way upward and all are not corrupt or immoral
- f.) Don't Know
- g.) No Response

QF10. It is often discussed in public debate that India's slow pace of decision-making delays developmental work. Do you think we need strong leadership leads for efficient governance?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF11. Do you think in a democracy concerns of various sections of people should be considered in decision making even if it delays the decision ?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

QF12. The ruling party comes to power by winning the mandate of the people. Do you think elected governments should act against the spirit of the constitution as they have the popular mandate to rule?

- a) Yes b) No c) Not Sure d) Don't Know e) No Response

If yes or no, can you elaborate on this.....

QF13. Do you think that the judiciary should intervene if the elected government acts against the constitutional guidelines?

- a) Yes, it is the duty of the judiciary to check the misuse of governmental power b) No, the judiciary as a non-elected body shouldn't intervene in the functioning of a democratically elected government c) Not Sure d) No Response

QF14. Do you think popular demands should be prioritised over constitutional guidelines in a democracy?

- a) Not under any circumstances b) Yes it should be sidelined as in a democracy popular demand is supreme c) Only if the demand is extremely important for the benefit of the people. d) A proper procedure should be followed even if constitutional guidelines have to be sidelined to accommodate popular demands e) No Response

## **ANNEXURE B**

### **Fieldnote**

The fieldwork, which I have undertaken for my PhD research, have been a great learning experience. I chose to include the demand side along with the supply side of populism in the framework of my study as I was extremely keen to understand how people look at the political appeals made by populist leaders. The fieldwork was planned in parts of West Bengal, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh in compliance with the choice of leaders that I have studied in this research. First, I made a set of draft questionnaires for the three states, including the relevant questions needed for studying the public perception on the populist leadership appeals in India. Sets of questions for the FGDs and interviews were also prepared. After incorporating the initial feedback from my supervisor, I shared the questionnaires with few experts who are familiar with the political terrain of West Bengal, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. After receiving their suggestions, I did a pilot survey with my friends and family members to test whether the respondents are responding well to the survey questionnaire. One problem which I encountered was that my questionnaires were very lengthy. Though I had substantially abridged it, it was many a time, challenging to convince the respondents to fill it up due to its long length. I also had the questionnaires translated in Bengali and Hindi so that I could reach the respondents who are not comfortable in answering the questions in English.

I understood that it is very important to keep the questionnaire compact and short to get responses more easily from the respondents. Next part of the job was to plan the field visits. Planning a number of fieldtrips in three states while being engaged in a full-time job required meticulous and systematic planning. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the planned fieldwork by two years. Initially, I tried to make it up by organising online interviews and surveys. However, I realised discussing perspectives on politics with common people involved personal and sensitive issues and in-person meetings are more effective way in taking the respondents into confidence. I made it a point to categorically inform the respondents before conducting all surveys, FGDs or interviews that it is going to be anonymous and identities of the respondents will not be revealed. Getting appropriate and constructive contacts who could help me to reach my target respondents has been very crucial for making my fieldwork fruitful.

The contacts had to be approached well before the time of my planned visit and the trips were accordingly planned. Finding appropriate respondents who are readily available for

participating in an interview or a survey was not always easy, especially for discussing political issues. So, in many instances, fieldwork took more time than expected and I also had to go back to the same place more than once to get adequate responses. Also, despite assurances of anonymity, I found people to be hesitant in giving their responses to some questions. So, I realised that its normal to not always get all desired responses from everyone and its extremely crucial to respect the choices of my respondents. The sampling of the respondents needed to be as representative as possible. However, getting responses across all social or regional diversities became challenging and time-taking at times. Managing the expenses for these fieldtrips on my own has been a difficulty and demanded proper planning. It has also been very important to be mindful of and careful about my personal biases in the public interactions during the fieldwork that could also impact the data collection and research findings.

Despite the share of logistical and procedural challenges, the fieldwork has been an extremely enriching experience for me. I got an opportunity to interact with a diverse group of people across the three states in India. This gave me a chance to understand how people from different regions and background have such diverse views on politics, leadership, society and democracy. My biggest learning has been that there is no one perspective but many for understanding India's diverse political landscape.

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