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Political Deification and Religious Populism in Modi's India

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Abstract

The article explores the phenomenon of political deification within the framework of religious populism, focusing on the leadership of Narendra Modi in India. Drawing on discourse theory, religious studies, and critical media studies, the paper examines how Modi's image is sacralized, positioning him as more than a political leader – transforming him into a deity-like figure. Furthermore, by employing the concept of *populist darshan*, the article highlights how Modi's visual and rhetorical strategies, amplified by digital media and mass communication technologies, construct a direct and intimate connection between him and *the people*. The Modi effect, characterized by the projection of an omnipresent and accessible leader, mirrors religious practices, fostering a perception of authority and reinforcing the Modi myth. This fusion of religious symbolism and political rhetoric is central to religious populism, where the boundaries between the sacred and the secular are fluid, and the leader is elevated to an exalted status. The article argues that Modi's political deification is a powerful tool in consolidating power, offering insights into the intersection of religion, media, and populism in contemporary political life.

Keywords

religious populism – deification – Narendra Modi – hybrid media – populist darshan

1 Introduction

The fusion of religion and politics has renewed significance recently, especially in populist movements. The veneration of populist leaders has emerged as a key characteristic of many such movements, where leaders are not only portrayed as embodiments of national or cultural identities but also as figures of salvific promise.¹ In Turkey, President Erdoğan has increasingly incorporated Islamic symbols and rhetoric, positioning himself as the protector of Turkey's Muslim identity against secularism and Western influence.² In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has embraced Christian nationalism, casting himself as the defender of Christian values.³ Similarly, in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro harnessed Evangelical Christian support, presenting himself as a defender of Christian values in the face of secular and leftist ideologies.⁴ Even in the United States, Donald Trump garnered significant evangelical support, with some religious leaders framing his presidency as divinely ordained.⁵

Often, existing research has concentrated on the opportunism of populist leaders, highlighting how they have 'hijacked' religion for political purposes.⁶ This line of inquiry corresponds with the dominant Western perspective that views religion as a corrosive force in the political realm – a toxin that sows discord, fosters bigotry and deepens the divisions that fracture the social fabric. Religion, in this light, is seen as the fuel for intolerance, a backward force at odds with the rational progress of modern politics. Furthermore, the political manifestation of religion in contemporary society "is conceptualized as fundamentalism," mostly reserved for non-western countries.⁷ Yet, this narrow vision fails to grasp the profound complexity of religion's role in the public sphere,

1 Light, I. "Trump's Charisma." *Critical Sociology*, 49(3), 2023, 529–544; Da Silva, F. C., and Brito Vieira, M. "Populism and the Politics of Redemption." *Thesis Eleven*, 149(1), 2018, 10–30.

2 Yilmaz, I. and Morieson, N. "Islam and Civilizational Populism." In *Religions and the Global Rise of Civilizational Populism*, 45–109. (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023).

3 Ádám, Z., & Bozóki, A. "State and Faith: Right-Wing Populism and Nationalized Religion in Hungary." *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 2(1) (2016), 98–122.

4 Burity, J. "Conservative Wave, Religion and the Secular State in Post-Impeachment Brazil." *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, 4(1) (2020), 83–107.

5 Gorski, P. & Perry, S. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2021).

6 See, Giorgi, A. "Hijack or Release? On the Heuristic Limits of the Frame of Instrumentalization of Religion for Discussing the Entanglements of Populism, Religion, and Gender." *Identities*, 29(4), 2022, 483–99.

Marzouki, N., McDonnell, D., and Olivier, R. (eds). *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*. London: C. Hurst, 2016.

7 Van Der Veer, P. and Lehmann, H. eds., 1999. *Nation and religion: perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton University Press.

especially with the currents of religious populism getting stronger – both in the Global North and Global South. This dominant view, which frames religion as a dangerous tool hijacked by populists for their purposes, oversimplifies the relationship between populism and religion. While it's true that populist leaders often co-opt religious symbols and narratives to consolidate their power, such analysis overlooks why these leaders resonate so profoundly with the masses. It reduces religion to a mere instrument of manipulation, ignoring how populists tap into deeply held identities, shared histories, and collective emotions. Furthermore, by focusing solely on the opportunism of populist leaders, this scholarship fails to explore how and why these figures can engage with the people they claim to represent.

This paper seeks to challenge these prevailing views by contributing to the growing scholarship on religious populism, specifically examining the process of political deification through the case of Narendra Modi in India. The phenomenon of *political deification* draws upon a long-standing tradition where political leaders are elevated to deity-like status.⁸ This process involves the attribution of divine or superhuman qualities to charismatic figures who, through their leadership and public image, come to embody qualities typically associated with gods, such as omniscience, moral superiority, or invincibility. Political deification is a powerful tool that has historical roots but finds distinct manifestations in contemporary Indian politics under Modi, particularly in the age of hybrid media.⁹

In 2024, Modi secured his third consecutive term as Prime Minister of India, cementing his position as one of the country's longest-serving leaders.¹⁰ Despite falling short of an outright parliamentary majority in this latest electoral cycle, Modi continues to command significant domestic support and enjoys widespread recognition as one of the most popular political leaders on the global stage.¹¹ Modi's persona, crafted through a blend of carefully curated imagery, rhetorical skill, and strategic political moves is moved by an underlying

8 Sen, M. "Between Religion and Politics: The Political Deification of Mahishasur." *Religion* 52(4) (2022): 616–636; Pinney, C. *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

9 Chadwick, A. *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2017).

10 ET Online. "Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi: Longest-serving PMs of India." *The Economic Times*, 27 February 2024. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/jawaharlal-nehru-to-narendra-modi-longest-serving-pms-of-india/jawaharlal-nehru-1947-1964/slideshow/108045655.cms?from=mdr>.

11 Sukheja, B. "PM Modi Once Again Tops List of Most Popular Global Leader With 69% Rating: Survey." *NDTV*, 3 August 2024. Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-once-again-tops-list-of-most-popular-global-leader-with-69-rating-survey-6254819>.

political logic and is deeply driven by religious populism that seeks to synthesize the notion of India as a fundamentally Hindu nation.

Here, the research takes religious populism to be a “situational and contingent idea,” shaped by the specific sociocultural and historical contexts in which it arises.¹² Long-standing cultural practices and social routines can play a crucial role in shaping the ways people understand and interact with political deification and religious populism, particularly about political figures and their portrayal in the media. These deep-seated traditions inform the collective epistemology surrounding the relationship between the public, the political leader, and the media apparatus that sustains their image. In particular, cultural norms of reverence and devotion can significantly influence how political leaders are perceived as deity-like figures. In this dynamic, modern communication technologies, such as social media and televised broadcasts, amplify traditional forms of reverence, embedding them in contemporary political engagement.¹³ Therefore, the situational nature of religious populism is deeply entwined with the cultural frameworks and media mechanisms that shape public perceptions of political leaders.

Undertaking this perspective challenges the normative idea of political subjects as autonomous, secular, and rational decision-makers, as classical liberal theories might suggest.¹⁴ Instead, their emergence occurs within specific historical and sociocultural contexts, which profoundly shape their political agency. The relationships between domains that are often heuristically separated – such as the religious, social, political, and cultural – are fluid and contingent. These configurations arise in ways that cannot be predetermined or universally prescribed by normative models of modernity, which tend to assume a strict separation between these spheres.¹⁵ This perspective challenges the Western-centric assumption that modernity requires the privatization of religion and its exclusion from political life. Instead, it acknowledges the interdependence of religious and political identities in many parts

12 Yilmaz, I., Morieson, N., and Demir, M. “Exploring Religions in Relation to Populism: A Tour Around the World.” *Religions*, 12(5), 2021, p. 301; Valaskivi, K., Sumiala, J., and Pyrhönen, N. “Conceptualizing Populism about/in/as Religion: Illustrations from Nordic Media Sphere.” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 36(2), 2023, 69–80.

13 Sumiala, J., Hoover, S. M., and Laughlin, C. “Religious Populism?: Rethinking Concepts and Consequences in a Hybrid Media Age Introduction.” *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 2023, 2795–2804.

14 Chatterjee, P. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

15 Asad, T. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. (Stanford University Press, 2003).

of the world, where they often coalesce in ways that defy the linear progression assumed by secular liberalism.¹⁶ Such a perspective allows us to explore the fluid and contingent relationships between religious, cultural, and political domains, offering a deeper understanding of the rise of religious populism, and how leaders and populist leaders can harness these connections to forge powerful political movements.

To understand the phenomenon of political deification, and religious populism, the article employs a multidisciplinary approach. The study is rooted in discourse theory, particularly as articulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, viewing populism not as a fixed ideology but as a political logic of articulation.¹⁷ Populism, from a discursive point of view, can be further seen as a tool to analyze community-building (us) as well as frontier-building (us vs them).¹⁸ This research also integrates insights from postcolonial scholarship, religious studies, and critical media studies to examine how religious symbols and visual representations are instrumental in sacralizing political figures, imbuing them with divine legitimacy and moral authority. Here, following Madhava Prasad, the concept of representation is understood in two interrelated senses: political and aesthetic.¹⁹ Politically, representation can refer to the processes of indirect democracy, where elected officials act on behalf of the polity.²⁰ Aesthetic representation, or cultural representation in its broader sense, involves the symbolic mediation of the world through texts, images, and cultural artifacts.²¹ These representations are far from neutral or transparent; they are deeply influenced by the codes, conventions, and ideological constraints shaping their creation and reception. In the realm of religious populism, cultural representation can become a key instrument for constructing and consolidating the authority of populist leaders.

Finally, this article adopts a conceptual methodology, aiming to advance theoretical insights while drawing on empirical examples to illustrate and

16 Chatterjee, P. *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Kaviraj, S. *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*. Columbia University Press, 2010.

17 Laclau, E., and Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. (London: Verso, 1985).

18 Palonen, E., and Sunnercrantz, L. "Nordic Populist Parties as Hegemony Challengers." In *The Nordic Economic, Social and Political Model: Challenges in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by A. Koivunen, J. Ojala, and J. Holmén, 153–176. (London: Routledge, 2021).

19 Prasad, M. M. "Cine-Politics: On the Political Significance of Cinema in South India." *Journal of the Moving Image*, 1(1), 1999, 37–51.

20 Manin, B. *The Principles of Representative Government*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

21 Prasad, M. M. *Cine-Politics*, Op. cit.

contextualize key arguments. These examples are not intended as comprehensive empirical analyses; rather, they serve as heuristic tools to illuminate the theoretical intersections between populism, religion, and media. The paper's outline is as follows – the first section explores the phenomenon of deification in political discourse. The subsequent section deals with religious populism in India, with the figure of a leader at the center of this discourse. The discursive construction of Modi's deified persona is explored in the third section. Finally, the last section brings forth the idea of populist *darshan*. Darshan, a deeply rooted Hindu practice that involves a reciprocal visual interaction between the devotee and a sacred image or object, closely mirrors the 'dynamics of networked visuality' and strikingly aligns with the visual aesthetics of populism.²²

2 Deification in Political Discourse

According to Moumita Sen, the concept of political deification, as it appears within the discourse of Indian print and electronic media, relates to the elevation of charismatic political figures to the status of a deity.²³ These leaders are often symbolically equated with established deities, positioning them within a broader religious pantheon or endowing them with attributes that suggest superhuman qualities, such as divine wisdom, strength, or moral infallibility. This practice effectively transforms the leader into a transcendent figure, capable of commanding loyalty from their followers. Conversely, the phenomenon can also operate in the reverse. In such instances, deities or divine figures themselves are invoked or personified within political rhetoric, serving as metaphors or symbols for collective mobilization.²⁴ This technique is often used in the context of electoral politics, where religious symbolism becomes instrumental in rallying mass support, imbuing political campaigns with a sacred aura, and framing the electoral struggle as a moral or existential cause.²⁵

The phenomenon of political deification is not only prevalent but deeply entrenched in Indian sociopolitical history, visible as early as the

22 Prasad, M. M. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Monteiro, S. "Welcome to Selfiestan': Identity and the Networked Gaze in Indian Mobile Media." *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(1), 2020, 93–108.

23 Sen, M. Op, c.

24 Sen, M., and Nielsen, K. B. "Gods in the Public Sphere: Political Deification in South Asia." *Religion*, 52(4), 2022, 497–512; Rajagopal, A. *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

25 Rajagopal, A. *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

pre-independence period. The “political deployment of the divine” – expressed in its varied forms – was a crucial factor in shaping the contested and multifaceted development of concepts of modern state sovereignty during colonial India.²⁶ The invocation of divinity was also one of the elements of nationalist movements where many nationalist leaders were relegated to deities. For instance, leaders like Mahatma Gandhi were not merely respected but revered with a near-sacred devotion. Often called “Mahatma” or “Bapu,” Gandhi’s image was deliberately shaped to evoke spiritual and religious symbolism, positioning him as a figure of deep reverence across both political and religious spheres.²⁷ Furthermore, within the nationalist discourse, the concept of the Indian nation itself was often personified in religious and spiritual terms, most notably through the figure of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). Bharat Mata, depicted as a goddess, symbolized the sacredness of the nation and became a potent metaphor for both freedom and cultural purity.²⁸

Political deification can also be intertwined with the dynamics of popular religion, where divinities and sacred figures are rarely static or immutable. As noted by Sumanta Banerjee, “popular divinities had never remained fixed and immutable. Images were consciously contrived, and the popular psyche added new images to serve immediate interests.”²⁹ Just as popular religion adapts its pantheon to address the evolving aspirations and anxieties of its followers, political deification constructs and reconfigures the image of leaders to align with changing socio-political needs.

In contemporary India, this phenomenon has evolved further, where in certain regions, the reverence for political leaders has reached such extreme levels that it has manifested in the construction of temples dedicated to their worship. These temples, often controversial, underscore the profound influence that political figures can wield. For instance, in rural Madhya Pradesh, a temple was erected to honor Indira Gandhi, a populist leader,³⁰ demonstrating

26 Banerjee, M. *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India*. (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

27 Amin, S. “Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–2.” *Subaltern Studies III*, edited by Ranajit Guha, (London: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1–55; Pinney, C. *Photos of God*, Op. cit.

28 Ramaswamy, S. *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*. (New York: Duke University Press, 2010).

29 Banerjee, S. *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal*. (Calcutta: Seagull Books), 6.

30 Vasudeva, F., and Lin, S. “Revisiting the Populist Moments in Postcolonial India.” *Populism* 7(1) (2024): 46–73.

the depth of her political legacy.³¹ Similarly, political figures, such as M. G. Ramachandran in Tamil Nadu and N. T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh, both of whom were celebrated as populist charismatic leaders whose popularity bordered on the divine experienced a certain level of deification and idolization.³² Sen, in her analysis, has highlighted the deification of Mamata Banerjee as the Goddess Durga while Modi has been cast in a demonized role, symbolically opposing the forces of good, represented by Banerjee's Durga-like image.³³ A similar trend of political deification can be seen with Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi, scions of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, as well as leaders in the Indian National Congress. Rahul has been depicted as the god Rama in posters, while Priyanka Gandhi has been likened to the goddess Durga, evoking her grandmother, Indira Gandhi, who was also occasionally portrayed as the goddess.³⁴

Political deification, while not ubiquitous, remains a prominent feature in India's political landscape. As Piliavsky writes,

People across India's landscape and political spectrum deify their political leaders, subjecting them to lavish rituals of veneration. They festoon politicians with flower garlands, bedeck them with crowns and swords, enshrine them in temples and douse their *murtis* in milk, curds, and ghee. This happens during elections as much as between them, in cities as well as in villages, in the Communist Party as much as in the BJP.³⁵

Furthermore, political deification can be observed as a broad phenomenon operating at multiple levels of the political spectrum. At the higher political level, it often serves to reinforce and legitimize dominant political figures

31 IANS. "Indira Gandhi Worshipped Like Goddess in Madhya Pradesh Village." *Deccan Herald*, August 28, 2021 <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/indira-gandhi-worshipped-like-goddess-in-madhya-pradesh-village-1024410.html>.

32 Bhugubanda, U. M. *Deities and Devotees: Cinema, Religion, and Politics in South India*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2018).

33 Sen, M., and Nielsen, K. B. *Gods in the Public Sphere*, Op. cit.

34 Nezami, S. "Posters Depicting Rahul Gandhi as Lord Ram Come Up in Patna." *The Times of India*, January 29, 2019. <https://www.abplive.com/news/states/prayagraj-priyanka-gandhis-new-poster-imposed-at-kumbh-mela-she-is-doing-mahishasur-mardan-in-the-form-of-goddess-durga-1061029>.

35 Piliavsky, A. "India's Little Political Tradition." *Political Theology*, 25(2), 2024, 130.

within established structures of power as the next section highlights. However, it can operate as an oppositional force, particularly within marginalized or sub-altern communities including indigenous and oppressed-caste groups. Here, it functions as a countercultural form of resistance to challenge the dominance of hegemonic structures.³⁶

Piliavsky further reflects that in a political milieu, these practices might be seen as “India’s quaint and quirky exotica” or remnants of religion and folklore that are seen as stylistic elements that are devoid of deeper political meaning or relevance.³⁷ However, this perspective overlooks the deeper embeddedness of such practices within India’s political culture. This political culture, shaped by an accumulated history of “references, practices, and meanings”, can be seen as an “embodied political historicity.”³⁸ It forms a layered archive of symbols and traditions that continuously shape and frame political discourse. This repository of historical and cultural references serves as the foundation for both dominant and oppositional political narratives, offering a shared vocabulary that informs and legitimizes various forms of discourses.³⁹ Sen validates this when she asserts that the Indian masses, “understands the forms, processes and material and symbolic indicators of political deification as a matter of common sense”⁴⁰

The concept of political deification as an *emic* analytical framework might perplex observers grounded in Western political theory, which traditionally emphasizes a strict separation between the political and the religious spheres.⁴¹ However, the relegation of religion to the non-political domain in Western political theory, rooted in Enlightenment rationality, constructs a binary that is often inadequate for understanding contemporary manifestations of the phenomenon such as populism which thrives on blending emotional cultural, and religious appeals with political rhetoric.⁴² Furthermore, despite a sustained and long critique, particularly from postcolonial scholarship, such binarization

36 Sinharay, P. “Harichand-Guruchand Thakur: The Emerging Icons of Dalit Politics in West Bengal.” *Religion*, 52(4), 2022, 595–615; Bhattacharya, J. “Political Deification of Lord Parshuram: Tracing Brahminic Masculinity in Contemporary North India.” *Religion*, 52(4), 2022, 550–575.

37 Piliavsky, A. *India’s Little Political Tradition*.

38 Hansen, T. *The Saffron Wave*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 28.

39 Ibid.

40 Sen, M., and Nielsen, K. B. *Gods in the Public Sphere*. Op. cit., 504.

41 Ibid.

42 Chatterjee, P. *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Abdel-Fadil, M. “Global Populism: Its Roots in Media and Religion | Triggers and Tropes: The Affective Manufacturing of Online Islamophobia.” *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 2023: 2883–2903.

still exists. This theoretical limitation underscores the need for alternative frameworks that can account for the intricate ways in which religion and politics intertwine in societies, especially with the rising wave of populism around the world. The processes of deifying political figures provide valuable insight into the hopes, aspirations, and anxieties that fuel democratic millennialism and ethno-populism across various regions.⁴³ Thus, this dynamic, as seen in India with the figure of Narendra Modi, requires an expanded analytical framework that accounts for the deep entanglement of religion, culture, and politics. In the next section, we will explore how Modi's political deification fits within the broader populist logic, using religious symbolism and *darshan* practices to solidify his image as both a political and spiritual leader.

3 Modi and Religious Populism in India

Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India since 2014, has emerged as a central figure in contemporary political discourse, particularly through his articulation of a distinct form of religious nationalism. As the leader of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), Modi has positioned himself at the forefront of a movement that seeks to redefine India's national identity by intertwining populist rhetoric with religious nationalism. Many scholars view Modi's politics as underlaid by populist logic.⁴⁴ According to proponents of discourse theory, populist logic operates as a political strategy that constructs a dichotomous division between 'the people' and 'the elite,' positing the former as a virtuous, unified subject and the latter as a corrupt, antagonistic force.⁴⁵ Central to populist logic, or what is referred to as the "formal principle of articulation," is the construction of a collective identity for 'the people' through the formation of equivalential chains.⁴⁶ These chains link diverse grievances and demands by uniting them in opposition to a common antagonist, a process often driven by effective mobilizations.⁴⁷

43 Michelutti, L. "Divine Kinship: Towards an Ethnographic Theory of Political Theology." *Political Theology*, 25(2), 2024, pp. 118–123.

44 Gudavarthy, A. *India After Modi: Populism and the Right* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019); Vasudeva, F., and Lin., S. Revisiting Populist Movements.

45 Laclau, E., and Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. (London: Verso, 1985).

46 Laclau, E. "Populism: What's in a Name?" In *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Panizza, F. (London: Verso books, 2005), 45.

47 Vulović, M., and Palonen, E. "Nationalism, Populism or Peopleism? Clarifying the Distinction Through a Two-Dimensional Lens." *Nations and Nationalism*, 29(2), 2023, 546–561.

In India, Modi's populism can be seen as a discursive project aimed at constructing a hegemonic identity of 'the people'. Modi's appeal, particularly since his 2014 election, transcends mere political rhetoric and embodies a strategic and emotional discourse that reconfigures the idea of India itself, drawing on symbols of *Hindutva*, a form of nationalism, as well as development to consolidate power.⁴⁸ However, since the latter has not yielded results, Modi has increasingly turned towards *Hindutva* to consolidate his electoral base.⁴⁹ Modi's political narrative draws heavily on the language of Hindu majoritarianism, where the figure of 'the people' is conflated with the Hindu nation. His rhetorical strategy does not merely oppose a corrupt political elite but frames secularism, liberalism, and minority appeasement as antithetical to the true essence of the Indian state, which he redefines as inherently Hindu. Religious minorities, particularly Muslims, are frequently portrayed in Modi's discourse as either beneficiaries of undue favoritism by previous 'secular governments' or as threats to national security and cultural unity.⁵⁰ They have also been depicted as a demographic and political threat, with *Hindutva* rhetoric emphasizing their historical role in the perceived oppression of Hindus during Mughal rule and British colonialism.⁵¹ Through this narrative, Muslims are cast as a permanent *other*, an antagonistic force that threatens the purity and stability of the Indian nation-state. This process of othering is not merely an exclusionary practice but a politically potent tool for unifying the Hindu majority under a singular cultural and religious identity.

At the same time, this discursive assemblage presents Hindu culture as inherently superior – morally, spiritually, and culturally. By positioning *Hindutva* (Hinduness) as the authentic and rightful expression of Indian identity, Modi's rhetoric situates Hinduism as the nation's moral bedrock. This framing aligns with the populist logic that casts *the people* – in this case, the Hindu majority – as the rightful owners of the state, while minorities, especially Muslims, are framed as outsiders whose presence disrupts the natural moral order. Thus, Modi's discourse not only mobilizes Hindu voters through

48 Anand, D. *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear*. (Springer, 2016); Jaffrelot, C. "What 'Gujarat Model'? – Growth without Development – and with Socio-Political Polarisation" *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38(2) (2015), 820–838; Sinha, S. "Strong Leaders', Authoritarian Populism and Indian Developmentalism: The Modi Moment in Historical Context." *Geoforum*, 124, 2021, 320–333.

49 Vasudeva, F., and Lin., S. *Revisiting Populist*, Op. c.

50 Ibid.

51 Jaffrelot, C. "Narendra Modi and the Police in India: National Populism, Politics of Fear, Victimization, and Cultural Policing." In *Right-Wing Populism in Latin America and Beyond*, 2023, 172–195. Routledge.

narratives of victimhood but also sanctifies Hindu culture, presenting it as the spiritual and cultural essence of the Indian state. In Modi's rhetoric, the Hindu nation serves as 'the master signifier' that attempts to close off the infinite play of meanings in the political and cultural realm. By appealing to a mythologized vision of a unified Hindu identity, Modi's discourse seeks to arrest the constant slippage of signification, which is inherent to language and political discourse.⁵² However, meanings can never be fully fixed, and the attempt to stabilize signification through Hindu nationalism is always subject to contestation and disruption.⁵³

In populist logic, the leader can also serve as a nodal point where different signifiers – values, demands, and identities – are temporarily fixed to create meaning. As Laclau argues, "the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to the identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader."⁵⁴ In this way, the leader's name functions as a structural point of reference, representing not a specific agenda but the very idea of unity itself. Narendra Modi exemplifies this logic. His political persona functions as a powerful *empty signifier* that embodies the hopes and desires of disparate social groups. Modi's rhetoric unites these groups – ranging from those seeking economic development to those championing cultural revival – under the banner of *Hindutva*, while his leadership signifies a vague but potent promise of national resurgence and Hindu revival. Thus, far from being a conventional political figurehead, Modi's strategic use of religious and cultural narratives enables him to seemingly transcend traditional political boundaries. In his discourse, Modi consistently positions himself as a leader above the "dirty sphere" of everyday politics, presenting his role as one rooted in a higher moral and cultural mission. By invoking religious symbolism and framing his leadership in terms of protecting India's spiritual and cultural heritage, Modi constructs an image of himself as a guardian of the nation's moral fabric, rather than a

52 Mouffe, C. "Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy." *Ethical Perspectives*, 7(2), 2000, 146–150.

53 In Modi's case, the contradictions inherent in his articulation of a Hindu nation – such as the exclusion of religious minorities, the fundamental divisions in 'Hindu identity', and the tension between India's secular constitutional framework and the religious underpinnings of his rhetoric – reveal the limits of this strategy. The very attempt to ground Indian identity in Hindu nationalism opens up spaces of resistance, as alternative discourses and identities challenge the exclusivity of Modi's vision and seek to destabilize the fixed meanings he seeks to impose.

54 Laclau, E. *On Populist*, Op. cit., 100.

participant in the often contentious and compromised world of political maneuvering.⁵⁵

The dynamics of current populist politics and the role that leader occupies in these movements can be understood through the lens of a fundamental rupture between power and legitimacy. With the advent of democratic revolutions, the premodern view of power as inherently legitimate – often seen as divinely sanctioned and a manifestation of collective societal interests – was permanently disrupted.⁵⁶ In earlier times, political authority was imbued with a sacred quality, deriving its legitimacy from divine sources, which gave rulers both spiritual and temporal power. However, the rise of secular democratic systems introduced a new form of power ostensibly derived from “the people.” Unlike divine authority, this modern form of power remains abstract, elusive, and disconnected from any inherent legitimacy. As Lefort argues, in democratic systems, “the locus of power becomes an empty place,” where authority cannot be inherently tied to any individual or group; rather, “only the mechanisms of exercise of power are visible, or only the men, the mere mortals, who hold political authority.”⁵⁷

This disjunction between power and legitimacy in modern democracies has led to the emergence of new political strategies, particularly in populist movements, where leaders attempt to reclaim a form of symbolic or deity-like authority. In religious populism, this gap is often filled by invoking religious legitimacy and cultural unity, where the leader becomes not merely a political figure but a symbol of the nation’s moral essence. Moreover, if in populist logic, *the people* serve as the central construct, forming the basis for a collective identity and political legitimacy, then in religious populism, *the people* are not merely a political category – they are sacralized.⁵⁸ This strategy, in turn, sacralizes both the leader and *the people*, reinforcing the notion that political authority is not simply democratic but spiritually ordained – *leading to the political deification of the leader*. This sacralization strategy serves to further entrench the leader’s connection with *the people*, casting their mission as one of spiritual, not just political, redemption.⁵⁹

55 Sud, N. “The Actual Gujarat Model: Authoritarianism, Capitalism, Hindu Nationalism and Populism in the Time of Modi.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 52(1), 2022, pp. 102–126.

56 Hansen, T. B. *Saffron Wave*. Op. cit.

57 Lefort, C. *Democracy and Political Theory*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988). 17.

58 DeHanas, D. N., and Shterin, M. “Religion and the Rise of Populism.” *Religion, State & Society*, 46(3), 2018, 177–18.

59 It also allows the leader to frame their opposition as not only politically illegitimate but morally corrupt or even dangerous, making dissent seem not merely political but an affront to the sanctity of the nation itself.

4 Roots of Modi's Deification: Levels of Sacralization

Modi's political deification operates on multiple levels, each contributing to the construction of his deity-like persona within Indian political discourse. This process of deification reflects an interplay between Modi's self-representation, the narratives constructed by other allied actors, and the way he is perceived by the public. Together, these layers of discourse contribute to the transformation of Modi from a political leader into a figure who embodies not only the aspirations of *the people* but also the moral and spiritual values associated with Hindutva and Indian nationalism.

At the first level, Modi's political deification is deeply rooted in the discourse he constructs around himself. Modi has consciously crafted an image that presents his rise to power not as the result of political maneuvering or chance, but as part of a greater, divinely ordained mission. In his own words, Modi has stated:

When my mother was alive, I used to believe that I was born biologically. After she passed away, upon reflecting on all my experiences, I was convinced that God has sent me. This energy could not be from my biological body, but was bestowed upon me by God ... whenever I do anything, I believe god is guiding me. (Modi)⁶⁰

In other instances, he has mentioned,

One may call me crazy, but I am convinced that '*Parmatma*' (God) sent me for a purpose. Once the purpose is achieved, my work will be one. This is why I have completely dedicated myself to God. God guides me to do a lot of work. Yet, God does it without revealing His subsequent plans to me. I cannot even call Him directly to tell me what His next plan is.⁶¹

This narrative of divine purpose is crucial to understanding how Modi self-deifies within the political discourse. He frequently refers to his humble beginnings, emphasizing his journey from a tea seller to the Prime Minister as

60 Business Today Desk. "God Has Sent Me, Convinced That My Energy Is Not Biological": Prime Minister Narendra Modi." *Business Today*, May 23, 2024. <https://www.businesstoday.in/india/story/god-has-sent-me-convinced-that-my-energy-is-not-biological-prime-minister-narendra-modi-430606-2024-05-23>.

61 Sharma, A. "God Sent Me For A Purpose, But ...': PM Modi To NDTV." *NDTV*, May 25, 2024. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/god-sent-me-for-a-purpose-but-pm-modi-to-ndtv-exclusive-5736055>.

a story of divine intervention and personal sacrifice.⁶² These reflections are not just expressions of humility; they function as a strategic rhetorical device that aligns him with the aspirations of *the people*, while simultaneously deifying his leadership. Modi's participation in religious rituals, his frequent invocations of Hindu deities, and his public declarations of faith contribute to his portrayal as a protector of India's Hindu identity. For example, Modi was famously photographed meditating in the Himalayas during his visit to Kedarnath, draped in robes amidst the stark natural beauty of the mountains.⁶³ This image evoked associations with Hindu asceticism, reinforcing his spiritual connection and presenting him as more than just a political figure. In another instance, Modi dove deep under the Arabian Sea to pray at the underwater site believed to be the ancient city of Dwarka. Reflecting on this act, he emphasized, "*sahas se zyada shradha ki baat thi mere liye*" ("For me, it was more about faith than courage").⁶⁴ These acts, along with many others that saturate the internet, reinforce Modi's portrayal as a leader guided by spiritual devotion or divine will. Modi's self-portrayal as a leader anointed by the divine allows him to function as an *empty signifier*, absorbing a range of cultural and spiritual meanings that resonate with different segments of Indian society.⁶⁵ By embodying various cultural symbols, Modi becomes a vessel through which diverse aspirations and identities are unified under his leadership.

Modi's reproduction of a particular form of populist leadership can be seen as a construction maintained and reinforced through symbolic and discursive means. His public displays are not mere acts of personal devotion but strategic performances designed to construct and reinforce his deity-like political persona. These corporeal signs serve as powerful visual narratives that elevate his image beyond the ordinary, embedding him within the cultural and spiritual fabric of the nation. Moreover, populist performances inherently contain a paradox, as they celebrate "the ordinariness of their constituents and

62 Vasudeva, F. "Situation Populism and Nationalism in India" in *Transatlantic Crisis of Democracies: Cultural Approaches*, eds Izarra, L. and Moyano, T. (- São Paulo: FFLCH/USP, 2022) 255–276.

63 Upadhyay, K. "PM Modi Spends Night in Meditation Cave Near Kedarnath." *The Indian Express*, May 19, 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/elections/pm-modi-takes-vacation-from-politics-meditates-in-kedarnath-5734996/>.

64 Bhadoria, S. "PM Modi Dives in Arabian Sea for Dwarka Darshan, Performs Puja, Sits in Meditation." *Mint*, 25 Feb. 2024. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/sahas-zyada-shraddha-pm-modi-at-underwater-submerged-ancient-dwarka-city-watch-video-pm-modi-gujarat-visit-today-11708861418119.html>.

65 Laclau, E. *On Populist*, Op. cit.

the extraordinariness of their leaders.”⁶⁶ The performance of ordinariness is accompanied by a performance of extraordinariness, creating a dynamic where Modi embodies both the identity of *the people* and stands apart as their savior in the form of a deity. This aligns with Benjamin Moffitt’s analysis of populist leaders who construct themselves as being simultaneously inside and outside the populace they represent.⁶⁷ By performing this paradoxical identity, Modi enhances his appeal, positioning himself as a leader who is both relatable and uniquely qualified to fulfill the nation’s aspirations as an extraordinary human who is ordained by God.

Furthermore, nowhere has Modi’s effort to reinforce his image as the nation’s self-proclaimed savior been more emblematic than during three highly symbolic events: the laying of the foundation stone of the controversial Ram temple in Ayodhya in August 2020; the inauguration of the new parliament building in February 2021, and finally the inauguration of the Ram temple in 2024. All these ceremonies were conducted almost exclusively according to Hindu rituals, narrowing the gap between religion and politics. During these events, Modi, draped in saffron clothes, took on the role of *yajmaan* – the patron of a Hindu religious ritual – offering prayers, chanting hymns, and performing sacred rites.⁶⁸ This deliberate alignment of his political authority with religious traditions underscores his attempt to present himself not only as a political leader but as a deity-like figure with a divine mandate to protect and restore Hindu values. These acts represent a broader trend in which Modi blurs the boundaries between religious and political domains, reinforcing his populist image as the embodiment of Hindu nationalism. As a performance of *ordinariness* and *extraordinariness*, these public displays of religiosity serve to align Modi with the common Hindu citizen while simultaneously elevating him above ordinary politics, placing him at the intersection of the sacred and the political.

Modi’s deification is further cemented by the discourse surrounding him, propagated by political allies, media narratives, and public sentiment. His allies have often referred to him as “God’s gift to India” and a “messiah of

66 Albertazzi, D., and McDonnell, D. *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6.

67 Moffitt, B. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. (Stanford University Press, 2016).

68 Vittorini, S. “Modi à la Mode: Narendra Modi’s Fashion and the Performance of Populist Leadership.” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 60(3), 2022, pp. 276–297.

the poor.”⁶⁹ Another member of his party has asserted – *jis tarah se Modiji desh ke liye kaam kar rahe hain, woh kisi insaan ke boote ki baat nahi hai* (the way Modi is working for the country is beyond the pale of ordinary human beings to perform).⁷⁰ Others have called him as the “eleventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu”⁷¹ The media plays a significant role in amplifying this narrative by frequently depicting Modi using imagery associated with Hindu deities. For instance, in a video that circulated online, Modi is portrayed as Lord Vishwakarma – the divine architect in Hindu mythology – being worshipped by BJP workers. The workers carry out an “*abhishek*” (ceremonial anointment) by pouring milk over his image.⁷² These representations contribute to the construction of Modi’s deified persona, blurring the lines between political leadership and religious worship. By associating him with divine figures, supporters and party members enhance his charismatic authority, making him an object of devotion rather than mere political support. Modi’s deification is further cemented by the actions and discourse of his ardent supporters, often referred to as *bhakts* or devotees – who have engaged in practices and propagated imagery that depict Modi in divine terms. For instance, some supporters went to the extent of putting up posters showing “Ram Lalla,” the child form of Lord Ram, being handheld and led by an adult Narendra Modi. Such portrayals go beyond mere political allegiance, drawing upon deeply ingrained cultural and religious values to position Modi as a central figure in the reassertion of Hindu identity.

Claiming a dynastic or divine connection is a significant political strategy in South Asian politics. This is evident in the prominence of political families like the Nehru-Gandhi family in India. Even at local levels, many leaders assert a hereditary claim to leadership roles. For example, Prasad highlights how actor Vijayakanth used images of the popular actor-politician M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) to position himself as the natural successor of his politics.⁷³ Similarly,

69 Hebbbar, N. “Modi Is God’s Gift to India: Venkaiah.” *The Hindu*, November 17, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Modi-is-God%E2%80%99s-gift-to-India-Venkaiah/article60513878.ece>.

70 N.a. “Venkaiah Naidu’s ‘Modi Is God’s Gift’ Praise Turns into a Chorus.” *The Times of India*, March 22, 2016. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/venkaiah-naidus-modi-is-gods-gift-praise-turns-into-a-chorus/articleshow/51504479.cms>.

71 N.a. “मोदी को भगवान वशिष्णु का ग्यारहवां अवतार बताया भाजपा प्रवक्ता ने, जानिए किस रूप में लिया” *Dainik Bhaskar*. <https://bhaskar.com/mharashtra-bjp-leader-said-modi-is-11th-avatar-of-lord-vishnu-know-about-kurma-avatar-5969363.html/>.

72 Mg, “Modi Turns God: Andhbhakti Limits Crossed Again?” *Mg News*. September 17, 2024. <https://www.mg.news/social-media-viral/modi-turns-god-andhbhakti-limits-crossed-again/>.

73 Prasad, M. M. *Cine-Politics*, Op. cit.



FIGURE 1

A picture of PM Modi as a Vishnu avatar, taken at a photo exhibition at Banaras Hindu University which went viral

Michelutti describes how the Yadav community in the state of Uttar Pradesh politically mobilized by constructing a lineage linked to the Lord Krishna.⁷⁴ In many instances, politicians would sometimes reference Krishna's mischievous persona to downplay the gravity of their questionable actions. However, in recent years, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the fusion of politics and religion has intensified, with political leaders increasingly invoking religious experiences to bolster their legitimacy and appeal to the electorate. For instance, an opposition minister recently asserted that Lord Krishna visited him in a dream, conveying messages that align with his political stance.⁷⁵ In another case, a political leader claimed to have witnessed a scene from the *Mahabharata*, further blurring the line between mythology and contemporary political rhetoric.⁷⁶ Arvind Kejriwal, another populist leader, has similarly invoked religious symbolism, claiming to have been born on Krishna Janmashtami (Birthday of Krishna) and asserting that God has entrusted

74 Michelutti, L. "We (Yadavs) Are a Caste of Politicians': Caste and Modern Politics in a North Indian Town." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 38(1-2), 2004, 43-71.

75 India Today News Desk. "Lord Krishna Came in My Dreams to Say SP Will Win: Akhilesh Yadav Takes Dig at BJP." *India Today*, 4 January 2022. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly-polls-2022/story/lord-krishna-came-in-my-dreams-sp-will-win-akhilesh-yadav-dig-at-bjp-up-elections-2022-yogi-adityanath-1895691-2022-01-04>.

76 Mehta, N. "Bihar Cabinet Minister Tej Pratap Yadav Tweets Video of Himself Watching Shri Krishna While Asleep, Well Past Midnight, Netizens Amused." *OpIndia*, 23 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.opindia.com/2023/03/tej-pratap-yadav-video-dream-mahabharat/>.

him with a special mission – to vanquish the modern-day descendants of the demon Kansa.⁷⁷ While such instances may sometimes be framed in jest, humor, or even mockery, they contribute to the intensification of the deification of political leaders. This phenomenon has gained momentum, particularly with Narendra Modi at the helm.

In the context of religious populism, the dynamics of star personae also offer a compelling parallel to the construction of populist leaders like Narendra Modi. As Prasad notes, star personae are themselves representations, but they are not solely constituted by the roles performed by the star. Once a star persona is established, their influence extends beyond the immediate context of characterization, communicating through channels that transcend their original medium.⁷⁸ Similarly, a populist leader's persona – crafted through political performances, public rituals, and media representation – begins to operate on multiple levels. For instance, Modi's carefully curated image as both a Hindu ascetic and a modern nationalist communicates beyond the boundaries of his official roles or speeches. His symbolism as a leader retains a parallel channel of communication, operating through religious motifs, cultural narratives, and the media's amplification of his persona. Like film stars who carry their persona into and beyond the narrative diegesis, Modi's political identity navigates and reshapes the spaces of religious and cultural representation to create a resonance that exceeds the confines of formal politics.

The BJP's extensive media ecology, which persistently disseminates propaganda that venerates Modi, has been instrumental in constructing and reinforcing his star persona.⁷⁹ This media ecosystem continuously circulates narratives of Modi as a leader with extraordinary capabilities – whether it is his supposed tireless work ethic, his decisive leadership, or his ability to navigate complex global politics. Modi is often depicted as a protector of Hindu values and a savior of the nation's moral fabric, further deepening the sense of reverence around him. The relentless portrayal of Modi in grandiose, often hyperbolic terms elevates him to a near-mythical figure, blurring the lines

77 Press Trust of India. "I was born on Janmashtami, will finish descendants of Kansa, says Arvind Kejriwal as posters call him 'anti-Hindu.'" October 9, 2022. <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/i-was-born-on-janmashtami-will-finish-descendants-of-kansa-says-arvind-kejriwal-as-posters-call-him-anti-hindu-11412171.html>.

78 Prasad, M. M. *Cine-Politics*, Op. cit.

79 A significant portion of India's mainstream media is now directly or indirectly influenced by the state or powerful corporate entities aligned with the government. The atmosphere of fear and coercion ensures that dissenting voices are either muted or marginalized, as journalists and media outlets face tangible threats ranging from financial penalties to outright violence or harassment if they deviate from government-approved narratives.

between a democratic leader and a deified icon. Social media platforms, in particular, have been pivotal in this process. Modi's supporters also actively engage in disseminating images, videos, and messages that portray Modi as a divine or heroic figure. These digital campaigns echo traditional forms of religious devotion, where Modi is depicted in settings reminiscent of religious iconography – leading Hindu gods, standing against the backdrop of divine light, or delivering India from chaos. Such representations are not limited to grassroots supporters; they are actively promoted and shared by official party channels, creating a seamless narrative of Modi's sanctified leadership.

Thus, BJP's strategic use of social media platforms has been particularly effective in capturing the informational space. Research highlights how the party's digital campaigns have created online environments where pro-Modi narratives dominate, often marginalizing or vilifying dissenting voices.⁸⁰ The deployment of trolls and bots further entrenches these narratives, contributing to a polarized digital landscape. The algorithms of social media platforms, as described create echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to alternative perspectives.⁸¹

This media dominance has a profound impact on public perception. For many supporters, Modi's portrayal as a near-deity aligns with cultural traditions of hero worship and the reverence of strong leaders. The relentless reinforcement of his image through various media channels cultivates a sense of inevitability and indispensability regarding his leadership.⁸² Furthermore, according to Basu, Hindu nationalism now operates as a "normative informational ecology" that presents an "electrolysis of older and newer forms" that creates a habitus of an "informational environment of Hinduness" within a hybridized media system.⁸³ Here, the visual and media strategies of the BJP have evolved into a sophisticated digital campaign, utilizing online communications, comic book depictions of Modi's life, and a vast array of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Modi's image was elevated through holographic projections and videos, portraying him as a quasi-sacred

80 Udupa, S. "Enterprise Hindutva and Social Media in Urban India." *Contemporary South Asia*, 26(4), 2018, 453–467; Thomas, P. N. "Populism, Religion, and the Media in India." *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 2023.

81 Valaskivi, K., and Robertson, D. G. "Introduction: Epistemic Contestations in the Hybrid Media Environment." *Popular Communication*, 20(3), 2022, 153–161.

82 Jaffrelot, C. "The Modi-Centric BJP 2014 Election Campaign: New Techniques and Old Tactics." *Contemporary South Asia*, 23(2), 2015, pp. 151–166.

83 Basu, A. *Hindutva as Political Monotheism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 120, 204.

hero-leader to a devoted – and at times, worshipful – audience. These strategies not only amplify his populist appeal but also embed his persona within the cultural and religious fabric of the nation.

Thus, Modi's religious populism operates within a hybrid media system, wherein traditional media converge with digital platforms to disseminate his discourse ubiquitously. This is supplemented by an omnipresence of religious populist visuality – ranging from photographs, videos, and posters to digital memes – which constitutes a central element of his populist strategy and is often referred to as “high-tech” populism.⁸⁴ This media branding has made Modi's presence inescapable.⁸⁵ At railway stations, he greets travelers from selfie points, where citizens pause to capture themselves with his image, transforming mundane journeys into moments of political alignment. His towering cutouts rise at public events, casting long shadows that seem to extend beyond the occasion, a reminder that his watchful eye is ever-present. In educational institutions, his face stares out from photo booths, embedding his leadership into the non-political spaces. His hoardings, grand and omnipresent, stretch across highways and streets, decorating every nook and corner of the country. These billboards, alongside his constant presence in digital media and on television screens, ensure his likeness saturates both physical and virtual spaces. This saturation transforms him into a constant companion and silent authority, blurring the lines between the personal and the political, the ordinary and the monumental. This visual saturation further serves as a mechanism for cultivating a personal connection with the masses, effectively transforming spectators into devotees, as the following section highlights.

5 Populist *Darshan*

In his seminal work on Indian cinema, Madhava Prasad identified the predominant mode of spectation as *darsanic*.⁸⁶ With etymological roots in Sanskrit, the term *darshan*, translates to sighting or viewing and traditionally refers to the exchange of gazes between a devotee and the embodiment of a deity. The

84 Jaffrelot, C. “Gujarat Elections: The Sub-Text of Modi's ‘Hat-Trick’ – High Tech Populism and the ‘Neo-Middle Class.’” *Studies in Indian Politics*, 1(1), 2013, 79–95.

85 Outlook India. “In BJP's New India, Modi's Selfie-Points And Photo Booths Are Everywhere” *Outlook India*, January 9, 2024. <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/narendra-modi-as-face-of-new-india-photos-340232>.

86 Prasad, M. M. *Ideology of the Hindi Film*.

material representation of a deity may range from a revered object housed within a temple to mass-produced images.⁸⁷ *Darshan* is understood as an act through which the god manifests agency in the world, and the devotee, as the recipient, receives this blessing. In this exchange, the devotee occupies the position of the recipient, while the deity exercises agency through the act of being seen. However, *darshan* is not limited to divine beings; living humans, such as spiritual gurus or even political leaders, can also grant *darshan*. For instance, a guru bestows *darshan* by appearing before a gathering of disciples, where the mere act of being in the presence of the guru is considered an offering of divine significance.⁸⁸ Similarly, a prominent politician, when appearing before a crowd of supporters, is not only there to speak but also to be seen, with the act of their appearance being as important as their words.⁸⁹

As Prasad writes,

in the *darsanic* relation the object gives itself to be seen and in so doing confers a privilege upon the spectator. The object of the darsanic gaze is a superior, a divine figure or a king who presents himself as a spectacle of dazzling splendour to his subjects, *the 'praja' or people*. (emphasis added)⁹⁰

Darshan, in its conventional iteration, involves the image exerting influence over the viewer. Those who are permitted to gaze upon the sacred image gain spiritual benefits, and in more secular contexts, material and political advantages.⁹¹ In political terms, having access to the ultimate source of power,

87 Gell, A. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

88 Babb, L. A. *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India*. (Columbia University Press, 1987).

89 Over the past two decades, a considerable body of scholarship has emerged examining the cultural impact of *darshan* on the evolution of modern visual media in India. This research ranges from the widespread appeal of calendar depicting Hindu deities to portrayals of gods, celebrities, and social hierarchies in cinema, as well as in television and video media. See, Prasad, M. M. *Cine-Politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in South India*. (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014); Dwyer, R. *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006); Kapur, G. *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. New Delhi (India: Tulika, 2000); Mankekar, P. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

90 Prasad, M. *Ideology of the Hindi Film*. Op. cit., 76.

91 Vasudevan, R. "The Melodramatic Public." In *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011). 16–64.

or even to intermediaries who bridge the gap between this powerful aura and the public, is crucial for acquiring influence and legitimacy.

The ‘visual-tactile’ mechanisms of *Darshan* have been instrumental in the strategies of Hindutva media for decades.⁹² According to Christiane Brosius, the Hindutva movement relied heavily on incorporating popular devotional imagery into its propaganda videos, embedding religious iconography within political messaging. Brosius identifies this as a form of intervisuality where religious images circulate across different social and media spaces, evolving in meaning depending on the context in which they are deployed.⁹³ This dynamic allows religious imagery to transcend its traditional spiritual role, becoming part of broader political narratives.

As with religious darshan, the mediation of this relationship between Modi and the public is facilitated through hybrid media platforms. This mediation is not incidental; rather, it forms a crucial part of the political spectacle that surrounds Modi’s public persona. Much like in cinema, where the hero is not a randomly chosen figure but belongs to a ‘class of the chosen,’ Modi is portrayed not as an ordinary political leader, but as one elevated beyond the common man, embodying the transcendent qualities of a savior or protector of the nation.⁹⁴ This form of political deification borrows heavily from the aesthetics of Indian performative traditions, which emphasize frontality and spectacle. Just as in the case of Indian cinema, where the hero presents himself as a figure of dazzling splendor, Modi’s public image is carefully crafted to project strength, grandeur, and moral authority. His carefully staged rallies, speeches, and public appearances are reminiscent of the feudal or divine figures in cinema who command the gaze of the masses, with the spectators – his supporters – revering him as a superior figure. The dynamic of visibility here is not one of voyeuristic observation, but of an elevated figure granting his followers the privilege of being seen.

In this way, Modi’s political persona resists the aesthetics of realism typically associated with democratic politics, where leaders are framed as ordinary individuals representing the will of the people. Instead, the *darsanic gaze* that surrounds him aligns with a different mode of political engagement, one in which leadership is not based on egalitarian or rational criteria, but on a sense

92 Mohan, U. “Clothing as a Technology of Enchantment: Gaze and Glaze in Hindu Garments.” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 12(2), 2017, 225–24.

93 Brosius (2002) argues that instead of “de-sacralizing an object,” as commonly assumed with mass reproduction, modern audiovisual technologies in India may, in fact, enhance and intensify the viewer’s perception of an invisible, powerful, and intimate presence within the images and their display.

94 See, Prasad, M.; Bhrugubanda, U. M.

of deity-like authority. This blurs the lines between political authority and religious devotion, embedding Modi within a hierarchic relationship, where he is perceived not just as a leader, but as a chosen figure who transcends ordinary political roles. Modi's persona becomes spectacles designed to evoke this devotional relationship. The leader is elevated to the status of a superior figure, and the people, as spectators, are granted the privilege of witnessing this deity-like presence. The spectacle becomes a form of discursive socio-political construction, where the people – *praja* – are bound together not only by shared political interests but by their relationship to a leader who represents a higher moral and spiritual authority.

The media, in particular, plays a significant role in amplifying the *darsanic* effect. Through the omnipresence of Modi's image in the news, on social media platforms, and across various digital spaces, his visibility is constantly maintained, ensuring that his followers can participate in the symbolic act of *darshan* even from afar. Media representations of Modi thus become a crucial aspect of what Bayart describes as the 'discursive genres of politics.'⁹⁵ By monopolizing the visual field, Modi transforms political engagement into a form of ritual participation, where the public's act of gazing at their leader becomes a way of constructing and reinforcing their identity as 'the people.' Moreover, this dynamic is reinforced by the concept of "distributed personhood," where the leader's identity and influence are extended through the material and symbolic mechanisms of media and public performances. As Gell's theory suggests, this distributed personhood allows the leader to exist in multiple forms – through images, symbols, and narratives – that resonate with different aspects of the public's political and religious sensibilities.⁹⁶ In Modi's case, his carefully curated image as a protector of Hindu values, a humble servant of the nation, and a decisive, almost prophetic, leader exemplifies this multifaceted form of personhood, where the boundaries between the individual and the collective, the leader and the deity, are continually blurred.

Mediated populism thrives on permanent mobilization.⁹⁷ The leader, within this mobilization, serves as the unifying signifier that embodies the people's will and sustains the movement's cohesion.⁹⁸ As the leader's image and rhet-

95 Bayart, J. F. "Finishing with the Idea of the Third World: The Concept of the Political Trajectory." In *Rethinking Third World Politics*, edited by James Manor, 51–71. (London: Longman, 1991).

96 Gell, A. *Art and Agency*, Op. cit.

97 Srinivas, S. V. "Fandom and Performative Political Regimes." In *Media and the Constitution of the Political: South Asia and Beyond*, edited by Ravi Vasudevan, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2021), 234.

98 Laclau, E. *On Populist*, Op. cit.

oric permeate every aspect of daily life, this constant ‘presencing’ amplified through *populist darshan*, reinforces the subject’s sense of importance and belonging within the political narrative, encapsulated in the sentiment: “*I matter, and no less a man than the leader says so.*”⁹⁹ In turn, this mediated visuality serves as a mechanism for constructing antagonisms. Through his *darshanic* gaze, the populist leader differentiates the “true” members of the community from their perceived adversaries – whether they are elites, minorities, or external forces. By mobilizing collective identities around this antagonistic framework, the leader consolidates the “us versus them” dichotomy that is central to populist politics.

However, the *darsanic* gaze, unlike totalizing forms of power, does not fully capture or dominate the spectator. Simply put, it does not subsume the spectator. Instead, it operates through a process of *symbolic identification*.¹⁰⁰ If we look at imaginary identification, “we imitate the other at the level of resemblance – we identify ourselves with the image of the other in as much as we are ‘like him’”.¹⁰¹ The symbolic identification is more complex; it involves aligning oneself with the other at the point where they are unique and inimitable, a quality that cannot be replicated or mirrored.¹⁰²

The *darsanic* gaze facilitates this process by enabling a form of engagement that is both personal and transcendent. It allows the spectator to partake in a mediated communion with the leader, fostering a connection that is not based on resemblance but on the aspiration towards the leader’s inimitable traits. This mode of identification is crucial in the political deification of Modi, as it transcends conventional political engagement and enters the realm of devotional practice. The leader becomes not just a representative of the people but an embodiment of their collective desires and ideals, positioned as the singular figure capable of guiding the nation toward its destined greatness.

Yet, scholars assess that Modi’s carefully crafted technological imagery and performances are a constructed fiction. This fictionalization of direct engagement and reception aligns with what Vasudevan terms the “Modi effect,”¹⁰³ and contributes to the “Modi Myth”.¹⁰⁴ As Vasudevan writes,

99 Srinivas, S. V. *Fandom and Performative*, Op. cit., 234.

100 Prasad, M. *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, Op. cit.

101 Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. (Verso, 1989), 121.

102 Ibid.

103 Vasudevan, R. *Melodramatic Public*, Op. cit.

104 Kaul, N. “Rise of the Political Right in India: Hindutva-Development Mix, Modi Myth, and Dualities.” *Journal of Labor and Society*, 20(4), 2017, 523–548.

the Modi effect claims a complete lack of human mediation, as the apparatus is only a technological apparatus to facilitate clean lines of communication between the leader and his people. Nothing in between, not time, not space, no humans, not even government to interrupt the communion of a people and their leader as eyelines meet on the imaginary screen of national desire.¹⁰⁵

This constructed omnipresence serves multiple functions. It reinforces Modi's image as perpetually accessible and attuned to the populace's needs, essential elements in his political deification. It also consolidates his position as the embodiment of the Hindu nation, portraying him as a deity-like leader who transcends human constraints of time and space. By being everything, everywhere, all at once, Modi reinforces his role as the constant protector and overseer of India's progress, contributing to the larger mythologization of his leadership as omnipresent and omnipotent – a necessary savior guiding the country through moral and political challenges, thereby consolidating the Modi Myth.

6 Conclusion

This article has examined the phenomenon of political deification in the context of religious populism, with a specific focus on the leadership of Narendra Modi. The article demonstrated how religious and political elements converge to elevate Modi's persona from a political figure to a deified one. By invoking religious symbols, mythological narratives, and cultural motifs, Modi's leadership is sacralized, resonating deeply with the Hindu nationalist framework of *Hindutva*. This sacralization is not a peripheral or incidental feature of his populism; rather, it is central to the construction of a collective identity for *the people*. The use of religious iconography, coupled with modern media technologies, has enabled Modi to embody a form of authority that transcends the conventional boundaries of political leadership, thus positioning him as the guardian of the nation's spiritual and moral essence.

Rather than viewing religious populism as an anomaly or deviation from democratic norms, this article has argued that it is a mode of constructing *the people*, extending the logic of populism itself. In populist discourse, the leader can often serve as a nodal point around which disparate social, cultural, and

105 Vasudevan, R. (2022), "Infrastructures of Political Address," in N. Majumdar and R. Mazumdar (eds.), *A Companion to Indian Cinema*, 360–85, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell), 382.

economic demands are unified. In religious populism, this logic is intensified as religious narratives provide a potent source of moral legitimacy and emotional resonance. The construction of ‘the people’ in this context is not merely a political project but a cultural and spiritual one, where the leader is seen as the embodiment of a divine mission. Furthermore, by exploring the concept of *populist darshan*, the article has shown how religious practices are adapted into the political sphere to reinforce this deification. In Modi’s case, the act of visually engaging with his image – whether through mass rallies, media appearances, or digital platforms – mirrors the traditional Hindu practice of *darshan*, where seeing and being seen by a deity is an act of devotion. This visual connection between the leader and *the people* further blurs the lines between religious reverence and political loyalty, allowing for the creation of a political subjectivity that is simultaneously religious and nationalistic.

Furthermore, when cultural identities are expressed and mobilized within the sphere of democratic politics, such as with Hindu nationalism in India, it is not simply a case of transferring pre-existing cultural identities into a secular, political realm for instrumental purposes. Instead, this articulation serves as a means to make sense of the social world. It acts as a strategy to impose order on the often chaotic nature of democratic politics, by framing it through the lens of an essentialized, eternal, and natural culture. This dynamic also highlights the interplay between representation and substitution. This is because political representation is not always affected through formal mechanisms such as elections or delegation. Instead, it often takes the form of substitution, where a figure emerges as the embodiment of collective aspirations and interests.¹⁰⁶ In such instances, representation collapses into cultural or aesthetic representation as the symbolic figure stands in for the people’s ability to directly articulate their needs or interests. This process transforms the representative figure into a unifying symbol, whose authority is rooted as much in cultural resonance and emotional connection as in formal political structures, thereby shaping the contours of identity and legitimacy within democratic politics. Modi’s deification, in this sense, offers more than a political figure; it offers a symbol of stability and continuity amidst the complexities of modern governance.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Modi’s populist logic is not totalizing, nor is the populist darshanic gaze ubiquitous. The field of politics remains fractured by underlying currents that destabilize and contest the dominant narratives. As discourse theory posits, the political arena is a site of continual struggle over meaning and representation, where hegemony is always

106 Laclau, E. *On Populist*, Op. cit.; Also see, Spivak, G. C. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson, 271–315. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

contingent and contested.¹⁰⁷ Despite the hegemonic attempts of Hindutva to present an essentialized and unified Hindu identity, alternative discourses emerge that challenge this construction. For instance, regional identities, secular movements, and marginalized communities offer counter-hegemonic narratives that disrupt the seamless portrayal of a homogeneous people unified under Modi's leadership.

Finally, this exploration invites further scholarly engagement with concepts of political deification and populist *darshan*. Outside the current context, a striking example of political deification can be seen in Donald Trump's portrayal as a Christ-like savior by segments of his followers. This narrative has been amplified in a different form and medium by the "God Emperor Trump," an online movement that employs religious imagery and digital memes to frame Trump as a messianic figure engaged in a cosmic struggle between good and evil.¹⁰⁸ Such portrayals not only cement Trump's deification in the political imagination but also highlight the role of digital culture in reshaping traditional ideas of religious and political authority within specific cultural contexts.

The interplay between political deification and populist *darshan* prompts us to examine the entanglements of power, legitimacy, and sovereignty amidst escalating global anxieties over political, economic, and cultural change. The rise of religious populism – whether in India or elsewhere – demands an exploration of how political authority is constructed and sustained through religious and cultural narratives. As societies wrestle with questions of governance, identity, and belonging, it is crucial to analyze how leaders across the Global North and Global South employ religious symbolism to navigate these tensions. Such strategies not only recalibrate the contours of political legitimacy but can also illuminate the broader dynamics of power and authority in an increasingly uncertain world.

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107 Laclau, E., and Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

108 Way, L. "Trump, memes and the Alt-right: Emotive and affective criticism and praise." *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25, no. 3 (2021): 789–809.