

Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi: Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections

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Abstract

This essay introduces the theme of the special issue. While elections across the globe today are mediated in the sense of being pervaded by the ambient presence and explicit deployments of varied media, the Indian national elections of 2014 showcase a specific logic of mediated populism that has become globally influential of late. To understand this logic, we examine the contexts and lineages of the present moment of mediated populism, i.e. the wider political-economic dynamics and contexts that shape and embed the Modi phenomenon. We focus on the changing relationship between privatized media across platforms, political elites and conceptions/productions of “the people” that these particular political historical dynamics have effected and enabled.

Keywords

populism, media systems, new elites, democracy, India, elections

Why Study the Indian Elections of 2014?

On May 26, 2014, the results of India’s sixteenth general (national parliamentary) election were announced, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a party of the “Hindu right” that espouses an ethnoreligious ideology of Hindu nationalism, swept the polls. The BJP’s victory unseated a Congress Party–led centrist coalition government mired in endless corruption scandals and an economic slowdown, headed by an uncharismatic Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh.

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The electoral victory stood out for at least three reasons. First, with the decisive scales of electoral victory and defeat—the BJP won an absolute majority of parliamentary seats—the main protagonists of Indian party politics shifted dramatically. The BJP's triumphant political arrival marked the electoral demise—at least for the moment—of the Congress Party, the institutional heir of the anticolonial nationalist formation led by iconic national leaders Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru that has been a mainstay of the Indian political system since independence. The BJP victory also attested to significant changes in the electoral fortunes of other political parties, most notably the demise of the parliamentary left (the Left Front) including the Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPI-M), and the poor performance of the new anticorruption party formed in 2012, the Aam Admi Party, which won only 4 of its 432 contested seats.

Second, the BJP's victory was disjunctive at the level of individual leadership. The man at the forefront of the party as its prime ministerial candidate was Narendra Modi, the controversial chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat who had been associated with the violent trajectories of Hindu nationalism. Numerous civil society organizations and national and international human rights commissions had implicated Modi for his role in the mass violence against the Muslim minority community, including at least 1,000 deaths and 150,000 people displaced in the state of Gujarat in 2002 (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Human Rights Watch 2002). Twelve years later, Modi's sweeping electoral victory and subsequent appointment as prime minister in the “world's largest democracy” underscored that a decisive transformation in extant understandings of Indian secularism and of the oppositional terms of the relationship between religious nationalism and democracy was at hand. To both his supporters and his fiercest critics, the reality of Modi as prime minister spoke of a new India in the making.

Finally, a distinctive feature of the 2014 election was the transformation in dominant media narratives. Whereas in his early political career Modi had “courted the media” successfully, the Gujarat massacre of 2002 “changed the Modi-media equation” in substantial ways (Sardesai 2014, 226). The “butcher of Gujarat” moniker of condemnation now clung to Modi, particularly in English language media worlds, and his loyal followers claimed that mainstream media discourse had been “vitiating by Modiphobia” (Kishwar 2014). In the run-up to the 2014 elections, the BJP worked long and hard to engineer a discursive shift. Skillfully deploying the media to erase the taint of narrow ethnoreligious nationalism and majoritarian violence, the party redefined its public message in terms of Modi's supposed success with the “Gujarat model,” denoting a commitment to fast-track neoliberalism.

In this reliance on media as an electoral tool, the BJP was not alone. The wider political theater of the 2014 elections stood out for the massive—and for India, unprecedented—role of (various kinds of) media institutions, technologies, and actors. The year 2014 thus marked India's late arrival in the spectacle of “mediated elections” familiar to observers of American-style mediated democracy. The Indian elections took place in the glare of close to 800 television channels (of which 300 are twenty-four-hour news channels) and 94,000 plus newspapers across twenty languages alongside one of the fastest growing advertising industries in the world. Political parties and their supporters made unprecedented use of advertising on television which for the

first time reached 800 million citizens, as well as social media targeting younger new voters among India's 300 million Internet users (an estimated 100 million new voters participated in this election).

These astonishing numbers, and numbers in general, tend to structure discussions of elections and media, the topic of this special issue. This is perhaps an expected outcome of the particular frameworks that structure most discussions of these two key *leitmotifs* of liberal democracy. Holding majority rule, the "rule of the most," to be the key normative principle of modern government and social life, the liberal dispensation takes the measure of democracy literally, through numerical measurements of electoral strength. Reflecting the imperatives of market capitalism, a similar logic of numbers attends discussions of media strength and significance. How much ad-spend? How many followers and eyeballs? These become the dominant questions when size drives our inquiries.

At first glance, India's recent elections appear to be an exemplary case study for such numerically inflected discussions. With a voting population of an estimated 815 million, India is the "world's largest democracy" as the tired cliché goes: every third citizen of a democracy anywhere in the world today is an Indian. But while factually impressive, numerical salience alone does not explain the political and social salience of any phenomenon. In the case of media and elections, this analytical deficit is particularly pronounced. The various measurements of electorate and audience size tell us little about the why, how, and what of voting, viewing, and tweeting, and the varied institutional shifts and practices of interpretation, interaction, and contestation that generate political agency and social life remain hidden from view. Rather than its numerical potency, then, it is the insights that it affords into these structural and symbolic dimensions of elections and media—of mediated politics more generally speaking—that motivate our study of the 2014 Indian elections.

But the distinctiveness of the 2014 Indian elections as an instance of mediated politics does not stem solely from the increase in media presence and expenditure during the elections. It is rather the new logics of political mediation, and the distinctive political forms and idioms that they have introduced into national public life, that call our attention. And so, more than the exemplification of mediated politics as such, the rationale for our focus on the 2014 elections has to do with the particular variant of mediated politics that the Indian case illuminates. While elections across the globe today are mediated in the sense of being pervaded by the ambient presence and explicit deployments of varied media, the Indian national elections of 2014 showcase a specific logic that has become globally influential of late. This is the logic of "mediated populism," whose dynamics and effects while potentially widespread (i.e. Berlusconi to Bush) have a particular resonance in postcolonial-mediated democracies across the global South.

Mediated Populism and Antipolitics in Postcolonial Democracies

Challenging Frankfurt school inspired studies of "mass society" and the deleterious effect of cultural industries on democratic "lifeworlds" (Horkheimer and Adorno

2002), a prominent body of recent scholarship has drawn attention to the mediated emergence of new forms and tactics of networked deliberation and participation and to the constitution of new forms of “connective action” where “pro-sumers” and citizens negotiate—if not subvert or challenge—dominant political imaginaries (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2013; Jenkins et al. 2013). However, in this reworking of the production/reception binary and the hopeful attribution of personal agency as a corrective to earlier assumptions about mediated passivity, what is often overlooked are the political contours and stakes of proposing and exercising such agency in the name of the people. This is what the analytical formation of “mediated populism” investigates, whereby the global expansion of the commercial twenty-four-hour news cycle and the proliferation of partisan online and social media in the twenty-first century is seen to enable distinctive projects of “people-making” with contingent political outcomes that cannot easily be classified as participatory, democratizing, or resistant.

Here, we are engaging Ernesto Laclau’s (2007, 74) understanding of populism as defined by form rather than content, where the logic of populist reason simplifies and divides the social field into two distinct camps, championing the *people* as against *power* itself. Laclau argues that the populist reason brings together disparate popular demands in critical historical conjunctures and should be seen not as a deviation of democracy, but instead as the very stuff of democratic politics. Populism is the “royal road to understanding the ontological constitution of the political as such” in his words (Laclau 2005, 67). Media play a key role in such “road-building” endeavors, with single-issue “neo-populist” projects (e.g., anti-immigration, anticorruption) that are fostered and consolidated in and by media, a familiar formation in twenty-first century democracies across the world (Mazzoleni et al. 2003).

Recent studies of mediated populism have focused either on the European context of the resurgence of the populist right ranging from Berlusconi to the Front National (Mazzoleni 2007; Mazzoleni et al. 2003) to the Latin American context of left-wing populism in the vein of the Kirchner administrations in Argentina or Chavez’ legacy in Venezuela (Fernandez 2010; Waisbord 2012). According to Gianpietro Mazzoleni et al. (2003), a formative theorist of mediated populism, the relationship between media and populism should be seen in terms of elective affinities and structural imbrications, rather than causal intentionality as such. In other words, it is not that media institutions and actors deliberately set out to promote populist politics and ideologies, but it is rather the “production bias” of commercial media organizations drawn to coverage of personalities over issues and “pursuing their own corporate ends by striking emotional chords on issues such as security, unemployment, inflation and immigration” (Mazzoleni 2007, 54–55).

The Indian experience provides several useful insights into these dynamics and contingencies. In contrast to both the European and Latin American contexts, elections as mass media spectacles are relatively new phenomena in India as indeed across much of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, where it has only been since the last decade of the twentieth century that government-monopolized propagandist architectures of television were replaced by commercial television news. In the intervening years, a new form of “entertaining news” (Dahlgren 2009) accessed by most of humanity

through television became a privileged domain of politics for the first time. In this same period, a political culture of disillusionment with traditional politics and established politicians (Mazzoleni 2007, 50) took a familiar antipolitical turn in India, articulated by the new urban and middle-class constituencies and votaries of neoliberal economic reform. The more general malaise over the “dirty,” inefficient, and morally bankrupt ways of traditional politics culminated in the “India against Corruption” movement of 2011 targeting politicians involved in massive financial scams ranging from the allocation of telecommunications spectrum to land grab and the commandeering of public and natural resources such as mineral deposits.

The predominantly urban movement popularized the classically populist language of the “aam admi” (common man) combating the predatory “political classes,” and its demand for legal accountability in governance and a new culture of “clean and transparent” politics found nearly unanimous media support and coverage (Roy 2014; Sitapati 2011). Indeed, despite the substantial divergence of its sociological constitution and of the normative import of its actual political claims as an essentially status quo-ist sociopolitical formation, in its foundational and enabling relationship with the media India’s anticorruption movement resembled many contemporaneous social movements in other parts of the world, whether the Arab Spring uprisings or the various Euro-American Occupy movements.

In thinking about the Indian elections of 2014, we must consider the changing relationship between privatized media organizations, political elites, and conceptions/productions of “the people” that these particular political historical dynamics have effected and enabled. On their part, the BJP media team appeared to have been practically following the playbook of successful communication strategies as outlined by scholars like Mazzoleni (2007). This included playing the role of the underdog in relation to the Congress government, spending unprecedented amounts on an “advertising blitz” orchestrated by hiring Ogilvy Mather’s national creative director (Piyush Pandey) to manage the “Team Modi” campaign, holding rallies and staged events alongside media appearances, and engaging in “tactical attacks on the media”—especially the national elite English language news media (Sardesai 2014).

Given constraints of space, we will now focus briefly on three salient dimensions of this dynamic relationship that have culminated in the present moment of mediated populism and led to the Modi victory: (1) the shifting relationship between privatized media and “the people” as distinct from the state, (2) the “networked” as opposed to partisan or pluralist relationship between political parties and regional/vernacular news media, and (3) the orchestration of old media and online and social media use as they coincide, converge, and collude with “people-making” political projects, in particular, the project of Hindu nationalism.

Media Liberalization and Populist Binaries

In postcolonial India as elsewhere, elite or establishment media, specifically the handful of prestigious national English language newspapers in the country, had historically deep ties to the ruling classes and their imperatives of governance. With

commercialization, the proliferation of private television news outlets, and the spread of tabloid journalism across media starting in the late 1980s, we see a distinctly “less deferential relationship between the media and the state” (Schudson 2002). What is distinct in India are enduring public memories of statist broadcasting monopoly (which ended only twenty-five years ago) that allow private commercial media to claim a position of presenting the “people’s voice.” Appealing to this logic, commercial news media, especially English language news media, became persistent champions of economic liberalization and critics of state-led corruption scandals, regardless of whether the party in power was the centrist Congress or the right-wing BJP.

The growing assertiveness of the commercial media’s relationship to the state led to a culture of political cynicism and pessimism through the repeated focus on political scandals pitted against the supposed transparency of corporate actors (Udupa and Chakravarty 2013). In this context, politicians who use commercial media to carry forward their political messages can present themselves as “against the state” by virtue of their nonstate/commercial communicative choices.

In sum, in the Indian case, we see a *coincidence of media and economic liberalization* (as distinct from both the European and Latin American examples of mediated populism). The privatized commercial media are today the enthusiastic champions of a new idea of “aspirational people” against “the moribund socialist state,” and politicians seeking to push forward this idea thus find a natural ally in this new media formation.

While the private English language media might be a natural ally of the BJP’s economic agenda of speeding up liberalization and putting the brakes on various “pro-poor” social welfare schemes designed by the Congress government, we also have to take into account what Arvind Rajagopal (2001) has described as the “split constitution” of the Indian media field. Scholars of Indian media have pointed out that the “vernacular news revolution”—the much more dramatic expansion of regionally based Indian language newspapers and television channels since the 1990s—reveals important distinctions between the relatively rarefied elite field of English language news and the popular news cultures embodied in vernacular journalistic fields targeting the majority of India’s less privileged mass readers and viewers (Ninan 2007; Rajagopal 2001; Rao 2010; Thussu 2007; Udupa 2012).

This split was effectively harnessed by the BJP campaign. For instance, in his book, *2014: The Election that Changed India*, noted television journalist Rajdeep Sardesai documents with great detail the ways in which the Modi campaign circumvented the English language television channels (including his own) to first establish the terms of his campaign promising “better days ahead” with more sympathetic Hindi language news outlets. The BJP campaign put the English language media “on the defensive” and positioned Modi as the “victim” of an elite “news media conspiracy.” In this manner, politicians who harness and speak to “vernacular media publics” across India’s twenty-two nationally recognized languages constitute the people/power distinction that is essential to the populist political project.

Networked Media Systems

The distinctive patterns of television media ownership in India, in particular, the proliferation of “networked media systems” also play an enabling role in the emergence and consolidation of mediated populism. In our previous research (2012), we have argued that, contrary to prevailing paradigms of comparative media systems research, what distinguishes the Indian televisual news media field is neither pluralist nor partisan media formations where political parties are associated directly or indirectly with news channels and newspapers (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2012). Across most Indian states, television networks are owned and influenced not by discrete and legally recognized entities such as political parties or listed corporations, but instead by differentially formalized networks of business, political, and social actors.

We have argued that political affiliations of media organizations and journalists in such “network media systems” are highly dynamic and contingent, characterized more by “shifting alliances” than by durable and stable allegiances, as Duncan McCargo (2012) noted in his related discussion of “polyvalent” media systems in parts of Southeast Asia. We found that such network media systems were those where political affiliation, ideology, and general political behavior of news media is not confined to a party-based spectrum of political behavior alone. Instead, other nonpartisan and extra-partisan political goals are also found to drive the media, such as, for instance, the quest for social mobility and caste power. Here, the distinctive socioeconomic composition of media ownership appears to make a difference, for instance, where new entrepreneurial classes emerge from sectors such as real estate and finance to invest in media.

In India, partisan and networked relationships between media institutions and political parties created specific sets of shifting alliances. Skeptical of the national English language news media that has historically defined the terms of the national election, the Modi team selected the politically sympathetic India TV, a popular Hindi language twenty-four-hour news channel, for its first televised interview in April of 2014. The channel’s co-owner, Rajat Sharma, an entrepreneur and journalist who hosts the channel’s most popular talk show *Aap Ki Adalat*, is also a longtime personal acquaintance of Narendra Modi. Modi’s appearance on this ninety-minute talk show with an enthusiastic live audience was met with “rapturous applause” and an audience that “went wild” in response to his every statement.¹ A controversy ensued as to whether Modi’s appearance had been “stage managed” by his campaign team, but regardless, the interview was a massive commercial success with the appearance triggering unprecedented Television Rating Points (TRPs) for India TV. In contrast, the leading Hindi news channel *Aaj Tak* which had aired the first interview with Rahul Gandhi, the Congress candidate for Prime Minister, had little rating success with its program (Sardesai 2014, 227–28). According to journalists who covered the election, the fact that “Modi brings rating points” soon shaped the volume of television news coverage given to the BJP campaign regardless of political sympathies of owners across regional and national television channels (Guha-Thakurta 2014).

The sudden and dramatic shift in media attention to Modi will be analyzed in greater detail in several of the following articles. However, for the purpose of our argument, we want to highlight the specific ways in which the networked media system of ownership in contemporary India shapes the “production bias” of commercial news media toward telegenic populist leaders. As noted above, Hindi television news operated as a network-based media system, where it was aspirations of new elites as opposed to political ideology commitments per se that ultimately influenced political support for specific candidates and parties. The networked ownership structure of the Hindi language news media also allowed the BJP to successfully maneuver tensions between competing sets of elites—in this case marked by language (Hindi vs. English) and class (new entrepreneurial elites vs. established elites). Ultimately, the English language television news media lost its ability to set the news agenda and were replaced by this new configuration of Hindi-speaking elite formations that found immediate commercial success with Modi.

Populism across Media: Old and New

Medium also mattered. Like the split language publics, leveraging the disjunctures and divergences between old and new, broadcast and social media—“contrasting the tweeple” and the “old media audiences”—proved to be another way in which the “people/power” distinction was secured. The irony of course is that social media engagement was itself a project that relied heavily on “old media.” The Modi campaign was especially adept at orchestrating “grassroots” Facebook and Twitter strategies in convergence with the most expensive advertising campaign in Indian history spearheaded by an old media behemoth in global advertising, Ogilvy Mather. The celebration of social media’s radical innovation and participatory promise also involved their representation as grassroots or “home-grown.” In fact, only approximately 25 percent of the country has meaningful Internet access, and the majority of the BJP’s cyber support comes from the Indian diaspora in the United States and Europe (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2007).

Finally, while many studies of digital media have focused on its mobilizing capacities in organizing new modes of social protest (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2013), the successful exercise in rebranding Modi demonstrates that the limitlessness of the Internet can also be leveraged for its unique technological properties of *silence and erasure*. In other words, the remarkable absence of discussion of Modi’s controversial legacy of violence against the Muslim minority shows how the possibilities of “archival emptiness” in an online age of media abundance enabled Modi’s recrafting of himself so as to literally erase memories of the Gujarat massacre.

Contextual Mediations

In light of the discussion above, articles in this special issue examine the *contexts and lineages* of the present moment of mediated populism, that is, the wider political-economic dynamics and contexts that shape and embed the Modi phenomenon. The

ambivalent, productive, and repressive *instrumentalities and effects of digital media*, the media terrain and technology most identified with the 2014 elections, are another common focus.

Although innovative and disjunctive, the Modi phenomenon does not stand alone but is embedded in a particular national and global historical context. Taking forward this theme of contextual specificity and historical contingency, the first three articles in our collection all examine different aspects of the transformed relationship between the state and “people” in the aftermath of the neoliberal expansion of the commercial media field.

Ravinder Kaur considers the important role of capital in shaping a populist pro-market narrative in the face of growing inequality. She assesses how corporate investment and branding of the Modi campaign and its tagline of *Acche Din* or Good Times represent a historical moment when capitalism was reified as the sole vehicle of people’s aspirations, which is unchallenged by any other political alternative.

Sanjay Srivastava looks more closely at the media’s role in shaping a discourse of Modi-masculinity that mobilizes caste and gender politics. He argues that the carefully constructed masculinity of Modi’s political campaign stands at the juncture of new consumerist aspirations, the politics of Indian traditions and gender, and the refashioning of non-upper-caste identities.

Sriram Mohan examines how upper caste and class “Internet Hindus” position themselves against competing elites holding left-liberal positions. His analysis reveals that Hindu nationalist viewpoints on the Internet are often positioned as a means of getting around the liberal, elite-dominated mainstream media—a move that ignores the neo-elite character of many “Internet Hindus” themselves.

Such a contextual embedding also affords an opportunity to regionalize discussions of Indian media, thus interrogating the “methodological nationalism” that inevitably structures most existing discussions of media and elections, which are presumed to unfold exclusively within an undifferentiated national scale. Turning to theme of regional media fields, Christophe Jaffrelot considers the use of television by Chief Minister Modi following the Gujarat massacre of 2002, where Modi’s politics of communication encapsulated an unprecedented form of visual populism.

Vipul Mudgal draws on a content analysis of election coverage in English and Hindi language television to demonstrate the absence of core issues of economic development in an election that was supposedly won on a “Gujarat model” prodevelopment mandate.

Somnath Batabyal considers the case of the Northeastern state of Assam to show that despite its so-called “separatist” political climate, the divergence from the national goes hand in hand with the desire for national identification and recognition.

Ending this section by going beyond India, Britta Ohm’s essay compares the media narratives and practices of India’s Narendra Modi and Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, both of whom are long-standing members of the Hindu nationalist and the Turkish Islamist movements, respectively. The comparison offers a useful entry point to track a substantial shift from modernizing state patronage under the

auspices of an upper class/upper caste and secular/Kemalist elite and the media institutions that they monopolized for decades.

Our final three articles examine the strategic deployment and contestation of mediated populism in the new media terrain. Joyojeet Pal offers a careful examination of how the BJP's capture of social media successfully harnesses aspirations for a modernity that mirrors blueprints from the global North.

Lawrence Liang argues that the field of Indian social media presents a paradox for the Modi media legacy thus far. Although the Modi team built their electoral success around the effective use of mainstream and social media, once in power the BJP government actively threatens to silence any social media critique or dissent.

Finally, Aswin Punathambekar ends the collection with a cautious note of hope or at least possibility. He argues that the realm of popular culture in the form of online satirical videos offer a strikingly different and immensely popular mode of engagement with the political in contemporary India. He concludes that citizens engaging with and circulating political material through various mobile and digital media devices and platforms, including YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook, might offer alternative ways to imagine political futures.

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1. The program was later downloaded some seven million times. It is still available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RRIQvViQw0>.

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