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Populism and the Political Language of Illiberalism in India: Demonetisation and the Speech Acts of the Prime Minister

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Narendra Modi's populism by focussing on a specific governmental policy – the Demonetisation exercise of 2016, a drastic policy measure which suddenly derecognised over 86% of the currency in circulation at the time. While economists have largely been unable to make sense of the stated goals of demonetisation, this paper argues that it can be understood through the lens of populism as a performative political act. By analysing Modi's "speech acts" on demonetisation, the paper claims that firstly, the demonetisation exercise is a paradigmatic case of populism in its performative avatar as it highlights how Modi constructed the people versus the enemy and a narrative of "crisis" to justify his authoritarian-style populism. Secondly, the demonetisation exercise shows how Modi predominantly uses the language of development and social justice, and dignity of the poor to build electoral support for the BJP's illiberal politics of *Hindutva*.

1 INTRODUCTION[1]

We live in populist times. In 2017, the Cambridge Dictionary identified populism as its "Word of the Year", describing it as a phenomenon which has become both "truly local and truly global" as nations, people, and their leaders "wrestle with issues of immigration and trade, resurgent nationalism, and economic discontent" (Cambridge Dictionary cited in Moffitt 2020: ch-1). Recognising populism's conceptual and analytical ambiguity in recent years, scholars have attempted to demonstrate the significant overlaps in its meaning and, at the same time, conceptually refine it through comparative studies to effectively analyse its complexity as an empirical reality. However, much of the comparative research continues to focus on Euro-America and Latin America to shed light on this global phenomenon. This paper draws attention to India, the world's largest democracy, which has a longer history of populism compared to the current global upsurge.

In this essay, I employ a "minimal discursive definition" of populism (Bonikowski/Gidron 2016), where the "nodal points" of such politics are "the people" and "the elite", and which claims to represent "the will of the people" (De Cleen 2017: ch-18). A discursive approach focuses on *how* the contents of populist politics are formulated rather than *what* the contents of populism are. Such an approach maintains that populism discursively constructs the people (as opposed to an already existing "people") through an antagonistic relationship between the "ordinary people" or the "common man" and a "corrupt elite" or establishment, positioned as the enemy (De Cleen 2017). This Manichean characterisation of politics of

the people versus the enemy is a core feature of populism. This essay follows what Benjamin Moffitt calls a "discursive-performative approach" to populism, where populist leaders must "do populism and perform for the people as well" (Moffitt 2016: ch-3). Following this approach, I argue that India's current Hindu nationalist prime minister, Narendra Modi, fits this definition of populism. I support this argument by focusing on one specific governmental policy: the demonetisation measure in 2016, which derecognised INR 500 and INR 1'000 currency notes in circulation with only four hours' notice to the general public. This drastic measure was suddenly announced by Prime Minister Modi on a televised address to the nation on 8 November 2016.

Since Modi came to power in 2014 and was re-elected again in 2019 and 2024, there has been a growing literature on his populist politics (for instance, Gudavarthy 2019; Kaul/Vajpeyi 2020; Chatterjee 2020; Roy 2024; Chhibber/Naseemullah 2024) but detailed studies on Modi's speeches, such as linking his populism to specific government policies, programmes, and measures are rare. So far, it is mostly economists who have written and commented upon the 2016 demonetisation exercise, where the focus has usually been on its stated goals, implications, and political economy (for instance, Ghosh et al. 2017; Midthanpally 2017; Agarwala 2017; Ramakumar 2018). Moreover, even when Modi's politics are under scrutiny, scholars have usually focused on his party's ethno-nationalist discourse and policy initiatives, such as changes to citizenship laws, the revocation of the special constitutional status of Kashmir, and anti-minority politics.[2]

In this essay, I shed light on Modi's populism by focussing on his public speeches, such as in political rallies, at the parliament, as well as his monthly radio show in justifying the sudden

implementation of the 2016 demonetisation exercise to the general public, which derecognised over 86% of India's currency notes in circulation at the time. First, I argue that the demonetisation exercise, which economists have shown to have "singularly failed to achieve the main objective it was meant to serve" (Ghosh et al. 2017: 99), can be understood when seen through the lens of populism as a performative political act. In other words, the drastic demonetisation exercise of 2016 is a paradigmatic case of populism in its performative avatar. It highlights how, through this measure, Modi constructed a dichotomy of the people versus the enemy and created a narrative of "crisis" to justify his authoritarian-style populism of strongman leadership.

Second, by construing populism as a discursive and performative phenomenon, and by distinguishing a rights-based liberal discourse from non-liberal and illiberal political discourses, I also argue that, in his political speeches, Modi combines a *non*-liberal political language of development *(vikas)* and social justice, dignity for the poor, and sacrifice of the common man, with his party's (BJP) illiberal *Hindutva* politics (Hindu nationalism) to contribute to a widely spreading illiberal political discourse and politics in contemporary India. The Hindu nationalist party, BJP *(Bharatiya Janta party),* which has been in power as a coalition government (National Democratic Alliance [NDA]) since 2014, and its cultural arm, the RSS *(Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh)* actively propagate the cultural and political domination of Hindus in India, and consider minorities, especially Muslims, as the "other" or enemy of India. As such, it is constitutive of an illiberal ideology. In the essay, I show that Modi's populism predominantly uses the language of development and social justice, the dignity of the poor, and the sacrifice of the ordinary citizen. It is on this justificatory mantle that the RSS-BJP builds its support and electoral base for its illiberal propaganda and politics of *Hindutva.*

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2   I thank the reviewer for pointing this out.

2 THE DISCURSIVE-PERFORMATIVE APPROACH: CONSTRUCTING "THE PEOPLE"

To highlight how populism has been affected by a heavily mediatised public sphere in contemporary politics, Benjamin Moffitt and Pierre Ostiguy have stressed the performative aspects of populism, highlighting the key role of the leader as "the performer of populism" (Moffitt 2016: 51; Ostiguy/Moffitt 2021; Moffitt/Tormey 2014). In a "discursive-performative" approach (Moffitt 2020), both communicative and performative aspects of populism are equally relevant. This analysis focuses not only on the discursive and rhetorical aspects, such as the use of language and speech, but also the performative and affective dimensions of populism, which include self-presentation, body language, idiomatic expressions, as well as embodied and affective dimensions, like suffering, anger, envy, and resentment (Ostiguy/Moffitt 2021). Thus, the modes of public performance and self-presentation of the populist leader become important considerations in their appeal to "the people". Populism must be "performed", and it must be "credibly performed" to create identification with the people (Ostiguy/Moffitt 2021: 68).

The performative turn in studies on populism has led to greater attention on the symbolically mediated action of the populist leader, such as the visual, performative, and aesthetic aspects of "speech acts" (Skinner 2002: ch-6), and the discursive production of meaning through such political performance. This focus on understanding populism that goes beyond linguistic-verbal discursive analysis to include non-verbal performative aspects of the populist leader brings to the fore the role of interpellation in populism. That is, through the process of naming, performance, and articulation, the populist leader brings into being (that is, discursively produces) the concept of the "people" and portrays the "elite" as the enemy, such that the "internal frontier" between the people and the enemy is not *a priori* given but politically constructed (Laclau 2005). Ostiguy's conception of populism, which focuses on "flaunting the low" in populist politics, goes beyond discursive analysis. Low populist appeal includes "issues of accents, level of language, body language, gestures, [and] ways of dressing". As a way of relating to people, it also encompasses *"the way of making decisions"* (Ostiguy, 2009: 5, emphasis added). Similarly, Margaret Canovan remarks that the style of populist leaders capitalises on popular distrust of a politician's use of evasive language and bureaucratic jargon. Populists, therefore, pride themselves on simplicity and directness, which appeal to the ordinary people. This simplicity and directness, she further notes, extends beyond communication style and populist leaders also offer political analyses and propose solutions that are also "simple and direct" (Canovan 1999: 5-6).

In the following section, we see that the dimensions of the discursive-performative approach, such as simple and direct policy solutions, flaunting the low, and performance of the leader's personal power, were dominant in Modi's *way of making decisions*, and indeed crucial to the whole justificatory exercise of demonetisation. It must be noted that performative aspects of populism include both political-cultural, such as strong and personal leadership and quick decision-making as well as social-cultural aspects, such as the use of local vernacular or "folksy" language, overtly demonstrative and colourful behaviour, and political incorrectness (Ostiguy 2009: 5), what Canovan calls "tabloid style" (1999: 5). Modi's mannerisms and his public-political "performances" are imbued with tabloid-style communication, and they are also built on demagoguery and deification of the leader as both Modi and his supporters unfailingly remind the public of his ordinariness – son of an ordinary *"chaiwala"* (tea-seller) (Business Today 2021) and a *"fakir"* (ascetic) (Mint 2019) – but also the extraordinariness that is required of a strong and decisive leader – a man with a 56-inch chest (The Hindu 2019).

3 AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

In the past decade and a half, like Modi in India, populist leaders and strongmen around the world, like Donald Trump in the US, Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, have formed authoritarian and populist governments from within liberal constitutional democracies. That is, instead of directly attacking democracy, authoritarian populist leaders in contemporary times have used democratic resources, such as elections and existing laws, to transform democratic regimes from within, yielding political systems that are "ambiguously democratic or hybrid" (Bermeo 2016: 6). The notion of "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo 2016) captures this political crisis in liberal constitutional democracies as we witness "democracy and authoritarian populism, liberalism and illiberalism exist in uneasy simultaneity" (Hansen/Roy 2022: 5). These hybrid political systems have been described as "democratic authoritarianism", (Hansen/Roy 2022) "authoritarian populism" (Hansen/Roy 2022; also see Urbinati 2019), "authoritarian constitutionalism" (Graber et al. 2018), "executive democracy" (Bhatia 2023), and so on.

According to Nancy Bermeo, the specific nature of the current crisis of liberal democratic constitutionalism may be narrowed down to the crisis of executive accountability, where several countries are witnessing growing pressures on, and the rollback of, constitutional mechanisms that ensure executive accountability and thereby keep executive power in check. "Executive aggrandizement" (2016: 10), Bermeo notes, occurs through a slow-paced but steady weakening of checks on executive power, where, through a series of institutional changes, the power of accountability-seeking institutions, such as the fourth branch institutions,[3] civil society, the media, and academia, is

hampered. This aggrandisement is effected by an elected executive leadership that deliberately weakens the power of these power-checking institutions, for instance, by filling them with members of their political party, who are already aligned with the leadership. Furthermore, such executive aggrandisement is justified using the rhetoric of democracy even as the executive targets established democracy-sustaining institutions (Bermeo 2016; Khaitan 2019). This incremental erosion of liberal democracy has also been witnessed in India under Modi's regime, where there is a "systemic dismantling of checking mechanisms" (Khaitan 2019: 343; Basu 2018), thereby undermining the accountability of the political executive (comprising the prime minister and his top ministers).

3.1 INDIA'S SLIDE INTO DEMOCRATIC AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE RISE OF "NEW HINDUTVA"

Describing the current crisis of India's constitutional democracy as "killing a constitution by a thousand cuts" (Khaitan 2020), Tarunabh Khaitan argues that the Modi-led government's assault on the liberal democratic order has been "subtle, indirect, and incremental, but also systemic" (2020: 49).[4] Khaitan argues that unlike previous governments, where the assault on democratic constitutionalism had been more direct, such as Indira Gandhi's imposition of the Emergency rule in 1977-78, the first Modi government, which came to power in May 2014, sought to subtly and incrementally dismantle all accountability-seeking mechanisms leading to "executive

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3 Fourth branch institutions are regulatory and oversight public

bodies, which are independent from the three main branches of government, namely the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. In India fourth branch institutions have, over the years, progressively become toothless. These include the Election Commission of India, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), and the National Human Rights Commission, among others.

4 For a counter-argument, see Rahul Verma (2023), "The Exaggerated Death of Democracy". According to Verma the current challenges to Indian democracy are not due to a decline in democracy but rather a result of a dominant-party system, in conjunction with partisan polarisation on religion and ideology.

aggrandisement" or "party-state fusion." He argues that the Modi government has

> ...consistently sought to erase the distinction between the party and the state by incrementally, but *systemically,* seeking to undermine or capture mechanisms that seek executive accountability... This incremental fusion of the party and the state, and the erosion of mechanisms seeking executive accountability were rationalized through a *discourse of hypernationalism* (which equated political opposition to the party with treason), *a managerial discourse* that promised probity, decisiveness, and efficiency (and painted political opponents as well as checking institutions as corrupt, indecisive, or inefficient), and a *welfarist-developmental-populist discourse* that characterized procedural requirements as hurdles that got in the way of delivering development to the people (Khaitan 2020: 51-52, my emphasis).

In convergence with the global democratic decline (V-Dem Democracy report 2019, 2023), India's democratic backslide into authoritarianism has coincided with the rise and popularity of Hindu nationalism in electoral politics. The ideological project of Hindu nationalism or *Hindutva* seeks to transform the nation's religions and cultures along Hindu majoritarian lines, i.e. a homogenised public culture of *"Hinduness".* Its political project today also envisions a Hindu state apart from the dominance of Hindu religion and culture in society. If 1990s Hindu nationalist politics, with its limited ideological and electoral reach, was considered a pathology in Indian politics, contemporary Hindu nationalism, which Thomas Hansen and Srirupa Roy describe as "New Hindutva" (2022), has been institutionalised and normalised as state ideology and political practice. It is a governmental formation with considerable institutional heft, enjoying mainstream acceptance (Hansen/Roy 2022; Chatterji et al. 2019). For Hansen and Roy, the new Hindutva is an example of "democratic authoritarianism" or "authoritarian populism", a trend we are witnessing

today globally. Thus, we see that, at least two socio-political factors are contributing to the growing illiberalism in Indian society: i) the popularity, dominance, and mainstream acceptance of the exclusionary ideology and politics of *Hindutva*; and ii) the incremental and systemic dismantling of institutional checks and balances within the democratic system, transforming India's political system from a parliamentary to an "executive democracy" (Bhatia 2023).

As an exclusionary political and cultural project, Hindutva propagates an "ethnic democracy" (Jaffrelot 2021: ch-1), rejects minority rights, and seeks to establish a majoritarian Hindu state (Chatterji et al. 2019). It is, therefore, clearly, constitutive of anti-liberal values. As individual autonomy, rights, and equality are the core values of liberalism (Freeden/Stears 2013; also see Börzel/Zürn 2020), it may be helpful to conceptually distinguish it from *non-liberal* political discourse, such as forms of conservatism (Kaviraj 2018), socialism, Marxism etc., where such values may not be at the core of these ideologies but they may also not be against liberal values of autonomy, rights, and equality (Bilgrami 2014: ch-5). Anti-liberal ideology and politics, however, like Hindutva, Fascism, or Nazism, are constitutive of illiberal values. As we shall see, the discourse surrounding the demonetisation exercise demonstrates that the predominance of a *non*-liberal language of development and social justice and dignity of the poor in the Modi-led governmental discourse has aided the ruling dispensation to systemically weaken or even hinder civil and political rights to realise the political project of an authoritarian Hindu nationalist state. In other words, because illiberal ideas are constitutive of Hindutva ideology and politics, the BJP-led government's focus on development and social justice and dignity of the poor has aided in sidelining a liberal rights-based discourse and politics. In fact, it may be argued that liberal rights are not only neglected but even actively challenged by the right-wing government and the

state, including the judiciary (Bhatia 2021; 2025). Thus, a liberal rights-based discourse in Modi's India is not only marginalised but actively and consistently challenged by the new Hindutva.

4   THE DEMONETISATION EXERCISE OF 2016

Colloquially known as *"notebandi"* (which literally translates as stopping or banning currency notes), the Modi-led government's demonetisation measure derecognised bank currency notes of the value INR 500 (approx. $ 5) and INR 1'000 (approx. $ 10) with effect from 9 November 2016. That is, these bills ceased to be a legal tender from the said date. Most non-credit money in the world today is not backed by any real commodity, such as gold, but by the legal power of the issuing authority of the government. The issuing authority, which in India's case is the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), promises to accept bank currency notes at their face value. Demonetisation refers to the removal of that legal backing by the issuing authority, such that, through this process, banknotes cease to be legal tender (Ghosh et al. 2017). When Prime Minister Modi declared the demonetisation measure in a television broadcast on 8 November 2016, this sudden and drastic measure, which gave only four hours' notice to the general public, was deemed necessary by the government to flush out black money and stop the flow of counterfeit currency from across the border that aided domestic terrorism. This measure was earlier rejected by a prior Governor of RBI, before his resignation a few months prior to the implementation of demonetisation (Khaitan 2020). The demonetisation of the so-called "high-value" notes removed over 86% of currency from circulation (Ghosh et al. 2017).

The demonetisation measure was cloaked in secrecy until its announcement to the public on national television by the prime minister on 8 November 2016. Over the following two days, banks were declared closed to prepare for this new situation. People were given until 30 December 2016 to return the discontinued notes to the offices of the RBI or commercial banks, where they would be credited to their bank accounts. Old notes could be exchanged for immediate cash needs over the counter up to a limited amount, provided they presented a valid ID and filled out a form. Initially, people were allowed to withdraw INR 2'000 per day, but subsequently this was stopped altogether due to problems such as cash shortages in banks and ATMs. Petrol, CNG[5] and gas stations, government hospitals, railway and airline booking counters, state-government recognised dairies and ration stores, and crematoriums were exempt from the ban and could accept the discontinued banknotes until 11 November 2016. This deadline was later extended first to 14 November, then to 24 November and finally to 15 December (but petrol and gas stations were restricted to 2 December). Deposits of the discontinued bills into banks were allowed only until 30 December 2016. At first, it was also stated that the RBI would continue to accept such bills until 31 March 2017 upon submitting a declaration form (Modi 2016a; RBI notification 2016; Ghosh et al. 2017). However, an ordinance was subsequently issued (later passed by the parliament as a law) that came into force on 31 December 2016 (The Specified Bank Notes (Cessation of Liabilities) Ordinance 2016), which legally terminated RBI's liability on the derecognised currency notes and even imposed a penalty for anyone found to be holding more than ten such bills or dealing in these bills. Only Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and those who could prove that they were out of the country between 10 November and 30 December 2016 were allowed to exchange discontinued currency notes at the RBI for a few more months.

Soon after the declaration of demonetisation, it was challenged in the Supreme Court and various

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5   compressed natural gas.

High Courts. A three-judge bench of the Supreme Court passed an order in December 2016 to examine whether the demonetisation exercise was *ultra vires* of the provisions of the Constitution, such as Article 300 A (constitutional right to property), as well as Articles 14 (right to equality), 19 (right to freedom), and 21 (right to life and liberty), among others (Vivek Narayan Sharma v. Union of India 2016). Since the most commonly used banknotes were demonetised overnight, millions of people were left without valid currency to buy essential goods, including food and medicine. In view of such hardships faced by the common man, these fundamental rights were seen to be denied by this governmental measure. The court also observed that the way demonetisation was brought into force also raised the question whether it suffered from "excessive delegation of legislative power, thereby rendering it *ultra vires* of the constitution" (Vivek Narayan Sharma v. Union of India 2016: 802). The Supreme Court judgement in January 2023 upheld the central government's decision of demonetisation as valid (Vivek Narayan Sharma v. Union of India 2023). The court's decision only focused on the legality of the demonetisation measure. It did not address other important questions, such as the coercive nature of this exercise, which compelled people to dispose of their cash within a short timeframe and without prior public knowledge of the measure.

It must be recalled here that ordinary people were left with no other alternative but to use digital transactions during this period of extreme shortage of cash. For a country with a large informal economy and a poor population, demonetisation created severe hardships. One assumes that, in a sovereign liberal democracy, when such drastic measures are undertaken by the state, they are taken not by choice but due to extreme situations compelling such action. Economists have shown that not only did the government lack any such justification, but even the underlying reasons were problematic (Ghosh et al. 2017). The

stated goals for demonetisation kept changing over time, in terms of the justification for such a drastic step by the government. In the weeks and months that followed demonetisation, the government's justification for the demonetisation exercise shifted from attacking black money and corruption to eliminating counterfeit currency that aided domestic terrorism, to calling it an exercise in moving towards a "cashless" and "less cash" economy (Modi 2016c; Standing Committee on Finance, 69th Report 2018). By the end of 2017, Modi seemed to revert to the rhetoric of corruption and black money to justify demonetisation.

In the next section, I consider the various justifications offered by Modi between 2016 and 2019 in different public forums, including parliament, public rallies, and his radio programme – *Mann ki Baat* (literally, talking from the heart),[6] for the necessity of demonetisation. Modi's speeches were manually analysed using thematic coding and keyword searches. The section begins with Modi's television broadcast to the nation on the evening of 8 November 2016, where he suddenly announced the government's decision to demonetise INR 500 and INR 1'000 banknotes.

5 PRIME MINISTER MODI'S SPEECHES ON DEMONETISATION BETWEEN 2016 - 2019

5.1 SHIFTING GOALPOSTS

Modi prefaces the demonetisation declaration speech with three aspects of his government's vision, which recur frequently in his later public speeches. First, he mentions how India's success in the last couple of years (that is, since his party, the BJP, came to power at the centre) is due

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6   Aired on Sundays, Modi addresses the nation every month via the radio programme 'Mann ki baat' on the public radio, All India Radio (AIR). As measured by the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) during the period 2018 to 2020, the cumulative viewership of the programme is estimated to range from approximately 6 to 14.35 crore (60 to 143.5 million) (Exchange4media 2021).

to the "support of 125 crore (1.25 billion) Indians" (Modi 2016a). This rhetoric that the government's success is due to the support of ordinary Indian citizens is central to Modi's rhetoric of "new India." Modi's new India aligns with a neoliberal vision of society based on "postreform consensus" (Kaur 2015), where the current project of neoliberal capitalism is no longer openly questioned within mediated public debate. Ravinder Kaur argues that postreform consensus has replaced the "Nehruvian consensus" of the early decades in postcolonial India, which signalled a secular, socialist state. This neoliberal vision is marked by ideals of high growth rates, capital flows, and good governance, which will ensure India's cultural recognition and restoration of national pride (Kaur 2015). Second, Modi highlights the government's motto: *"Sab ka Saath Sab ka Vikas"* ("We are with all citizens and for [the] development of all citizens") (Modi 2016a).[7] Here, the BJP claims that, as the party in power, it works for the development (*vikas,* in Hindi) of all citizens. However, as a right-wing political party, it propagates the exclusionary political ideology of *Hindutva,* where minority religious communities, especially Muslims, are seen as "the other" or "the enemy" of the nation. Third, in the television broadcast announcing demonetisation, Modi begins the speech by listing several welfare and developmental schemes that his government has introduced, aiming to "empower the poor" and include them as "active participants" in the path towards economic progress (Modi 2016a). Thus, although the Modi government actively supports a neoliberal economy, it has simultaneously continued to provide subsidies to marginalised sections of society (Sircar 2021).

Coming to the declaration of demonetisation itself, in this hour-long speech, Modi mentioned the words "corruption" or "corrupt" and "black

money" seventeen times each, "terrorism" or "terror" six times, "fake" or "counterfeit" currency five times, and there is no mention of "cashless economy" or "digitisation of money" (Modi 2016a). Thus, in the demonetisation declaration speech, fighting corruption and black money are highlighted as the most important issues, and a cashless economy does not even figure as one of the stated goals. According to economists (Ghosh et al. 2017), black money refers to a whole set of undeclared or under-reported activities, which can range from illegal criminal activities (e.g. drug smuggling or procuring arms for terrorism) but also tax-avoiding activities (e.g. underreporting revenues or production), where the full extent of one's wealth is disguised from the state to evade taxes. Black money, therefore, refers to a range of activities that do not necessarily require cash transfers. Moreover, economies cannot be clearly separated as "black" and "white" because money "does not acquire a particular colour and keep it; as it flows through different transactions, it can move through white, black, and grey hues" (Ghosh et al 2017: 16). Thus, economists argue that most of the revenues generated from "black activities" is not in the form of stocks of cash but "flow" of wealth (Ghosh et al: 16).

Table 1 shows how Modi's justification for demonetisation shifts emphasis in the weeks and months following the declaration of demonetisation, and supports the argument forwarded in this essay that demonetisation cannot properly be understood as an economic measure but as a performative-populist political act responding to the "crisis" of corruption and black money caused by the corrupt rich of the country. Within two and a half weeks after announcing demonetisation, the justification for introducing this sudden measure shifted from the original emphasis on reducing corruption and black money to the government's goal of a cashless economy and greater digitisation. As we have already seen, this latter goal of digitising money was not mentioned in the

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7   Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Hindi are official government translations.

original broadcast on 8 November 2016. It seems that as public criticism mounted, both within and outside Parliament, against the drastic need for demonetisation, the government shifted the justificatory emphasis from concerns about corruption and black money to the goal of digitisation of the economy.

Table 1: Modi's speeches on Demonetisation, 2016-19

Speech No.	Date	Topic	Corruption	Black money	Terrorism	Counterfeit Currency	Cashless Economy/ Digitisation
1	08.11.16	Declaration of demonetisation	17	17	6	5	0
2	25.11.16	Book release function to commemorate Constitution Day	3	1	0	0	2
3	27.11.16	*Mann ki Baat* (Modi's monthly radio talk)	5	7	0	0	13
4	03.12.16	*Parivartan Maha* Rally, Moradabad	18	5	0	1	3
5	10.12.16	Inauguration of Amul unit in Deesa, Gujarat	9	6	3	6	7
6	16.12.16	BJP parliamentary meet	5	10	0	0	15
7	19.12.16	*Parivartan Rally,* Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh	7	8	0	0	4
8	25. 12.16	*Mann ki Baat*	11	10	0	0	15
9	31.12.16	Address to citizens	7	8	1	2	5
10	01.01.17	50 Days of demonetisation, address to the nation	6	8	1	3	2*
11	05.02.17	Public rally in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh	5	1	0	0	1
12	07.02.17	Reply to motion of thanks on the president's address in *Lok Sabha* (LS)	2	3	0	0	3
13	08.02.17	Reply to motion of thanks on the president's address in *Rajya Sabha* (RS)	2	9	2	9	5
14	24.02.17	Public rally in Gonda, Uttar Pradesh	2	2	0	0	0
15	26.02.17	*Mann ki Baat*	2	1	0	0	5
16	07.03.17	Speech at the OPAL Plant in Dahej, Gujarat	1	2	0	0	0
17	26.03.17	*Mann ki Baat*	2	2	0	0	9*
18	06.09.17	Indian community event in Myanmar	2	3	0	0	0
19	04.10.17	Inauguration of Golden Jubilee Year Celebrations of the Institute of Company Secretaries of India (ICSI) at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi.	3	5	0	0	1

Speech No.	Date	Topic	Corruption	Black money	Terrorism	Counterfeit Currency	Cashless Economy/ Digitisation
20	29.10.17	Public meeting at Bidar, Karnataka	1	1	0	0	0
21	30.11.17	Inaugural address at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit 2017	4	4	0	0	1
22	12.11.18	Public meeting at Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh	2	0	0	0	0
23	16.11.18	Public meeting at Shahdol, Madhya Pradesh	1	0	0	0	0
24	19.11.18	Address at India Inc. on the „Reflections on Ease of Doing Business" programme, Delhi	1	0	0	0	0
25	30.01.19	Address at the New India Youth Conclave 2019 in Surat, Gujarat	0	1	0	0	0

*no direct reference to digitisation as the goal for demonetisation. Source: Official website of Prime Minister Narendra Modi: www.narendramodi.in/category/text-speeches , the Press Information Bureau, Government of India: https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive2/AdvSearch.aspx; Sansad TV on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/sansadtv.

In the original speech on demonetisation, black money and corruption were mentioned seventeen times almost simultaneously as a hortatory device to justify the soundness and necessity of demonetisation. In the TV broadcast, Modi states: "Which *honest citizen* would not be pained by reports of crores worth of currency notes stashed *under the beds* of government officers? Or by reports of cash found in *gunny bags*?" (Modi 2016a; also see Modi 2018b; my emphasis). Modi's statement that corrupt cash is hidden "under the beds" and in "gunny bags" should not be glossed over as hyperbole from a politician. Ironically, despite prodding the ordinary Indian public to enter the world of digital currency, the Modi government apparently believed that black money consists of "stocks" of cash stashed away by the corrupt rich in various hiding places. In public rallies, Modi has often used this rhetoric of money being stashed away "under the beds" and in "gunny bags" by the rich and the corrupt to convince ordinary citizens that demonetisation dealt a severe blow to such hoarding of black money:

Dishonest people will have to be straightened or not? Corrupt people will have to be put away or not? Shall we do this work or not? ...Is my crime the fact that I am working to give rights to the poor? Is this my crime? That those who have stolen the rights of poor people are now being held accountable [because of demonetisation]. Brothers and sisters, we hear news, that there was a raid in someone's house. Millions of rupees were found from under the bed. Whose money was this? Whose money is this? If there is anybody who has a right over the money of Hindustan, it is its 1.25 billion people. I'm fighting for you. Brothers and sisters, what is the most they can do to me? Tell me, after all I am a simple ascetic *[fakir]* man. I will take my small bag and move on (Modi 2016d, official translation from Hindi).

In fact, in his speeches, Modi often justifies the demonetisation exercise by pointing out how the corrupt money recovered through this measure helped his government launch and fund several developmental projects and pro-poor welfare schemes, such as building roads, schools, hospitals, universities, toilets, and providing free

cooking gas. Modi often points to demonetisation's success by listing these central government schemes. Most of these schemes are named with the prefix "PM" (Prime Minister), signalling their close association with the prime minister. Examples include the PM *Jan Dhan Yojna* (People's Wealth Scheme: banking services for the poor), PM *Mudra Yojna* (money scheme: bank loans to lower classes without bank guarantees), PM *Ujjwala Scheme* (Brightness Scheme: free cooking gas connection for the poor), PM *Awas Yojna* (affordable housing scheme), and PM *Fasal Beema Yojna* (Crop Insurance Scheme: coverage of natural disasters for farmers). The BJP and Modi's populism are distinctive in their labelling of central government schemes and projects, including large infrastructural projects like building roads, tunnels, and highways, with the prefix PM, reminding the public of Modi's benevolence towards the common man, which ensures their access to these basic necessities.

Economists, however have clearly shown that black money does not refer to a stock but to the flow of wealth:

> there is no reason or even likelihood that such money [black money] would tend to be stored in the form of cash. 'Black activities', like 'white activities', are meant to earn profits for those engaged in them; and simply keeping a hoard of money earns no profits. What Marx had said about business activities also holds about 'black activities', namely that profits are earned not by hoarding money but by throwing it into circulation (Ghosh et al. 2017: 16).

Apart from the fact that cash is not the primary means of holding illicit wealth, economists have also pointed out that black money amounts to only 20-25% of the country's GDP, one of the lowest percentage in the world (Ghosh et al. 2017: 17). What I wish to draw attention to is not so much the soundness or veracity of Modi's claims of demonetisation's success *per se* but rather his "speech

acts" which describe black money as cash hidden away by the rich and the corrupt. Such statements have the effect of the leader connecting with the masses ("one of us") with whom these "populist reasonings" find particular purchase. Thus, Modi's "tabloid style" (Canovan 1999) of reasoning and decision-making was crucial to the justificatory language of demonetisation. This argument that cash was stashed away by the corrupt rich continued to resonate with the masses even as 99.3% of derecognised notes were returned to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) (Ghosh et al. 2017; Business Standard 2018).

Within two and a half weeks of demonetisation, by late November, the Modi government shifted its focus from the necessity of demonetisation to the goal of greater digitisation and a cashless economy. In his speeches, Modi now gave more emphasis and time to the goal of a cashless economy. While the rhetoric of corruption and black money did not disappear from his speeches, cashless economy and digitisation gained greater prominence in the initial months of demonetisation, with the government even incentivising people to use electronic means of payment by launching various fiscal incentives, including digital lottery schemes, like the "*Lucky Grahak*" (lucky customer) for consumers, and "*DigiDhan Vyapar Yojna*"(Digi-wealth business scheme) for merchants. In his speeches, Modi also often highlighted his government's efforts in introducing various e-wallet apps, such as BHIM and RuPay, for easier online transactions. Again, without going into the necessity of a drastic measure of demonetisation for a cashless and digitised society, as well as the issue of easy access to digital modes of payment for the poor (Ghosh et al. 2017: ch-6), I wish to highlight how Modi frequently links the demonetisation measure to the government's pro-poor welfare schemes, and to the rhetoric of the rich versus the poor, where he portrays himself as working for and representing the poor. Modi's speeches on demonetisation, as I argue later, include and fuse

both "governmental" (that is, economic populism) and "ideological" aspects of populism (Chatterjee 2020).

Since his election as prime minister in 2014, Modi has been able to successfully position himself as pro-poor by publicising his low caste and class background as a *"chaiwala"* (tea-seller). He portrays himself as a self-made man who climbed the social ladder from humble beginnings to Prime Minister. It must be recalled that before becoming the prime minister, Modi was the chief minister of Gujarat since 2001. Thus, although Modi himself may be considered part of the establishment, he has been successful in marketing the image of himself not only as pro-poor but also as *coming from* a humble background.[8] This rhetoric was amplified during the course of demonetisation (Jaffrelot 2019). As noted earlier, Modi invoked a crude and contrived imagery of the corrupt rich stashing cash "under the beds" and in "gunny bags" to show how demonetisation successfully attacked the misbegotten wealth of the rich in India. At public rallies, wherever Modi conjured this imagery, he received resounding cheers from the public along with chants of "Modi Modi." Thus, irrespective of the success of demonetisation in reducing corruption and black money, the simplistic imagery that Modi conjures in his speeches, as him fighting the rich to empower the poor, has been successful in garnering public appeal. This partly explains the continued support for demonetisation among the masses despite its

apparent failure in fighting corruption and black money.

5.2   THE PERFORMATIVE-POPULIST AND THE WELFARIST PRIME MINISTER

In his book, *I am the People,* Partha Chatterjee (2020) distinguishes between two aspects of populism: "governmental" and "ideological".[9] He identifies the governmental form of populism with targeted redistributive policies that are designed to benefit large segments of the electorate to attract their votes. In India, such redistributive policies are now routinely introduced by virtually all political parties that come to power, both at the state and central levels. As such, Chatterjee rightly notes that by itself, governmental populism may not be sufficient to understand populist politics. The ideological aspects of populism, by contrast, draw attention to a set of representations that makes it possible for a populist party to effectively portray the disparate, unfulfilled demands of a variety of groups as essentially the result of oppression at the hands of the same oppressor. Such representations of grievances are conveyed through rhetoric, visuals, and performances, and make the "internal frontier" between the people and the enemy palpable in cultural and emotional terms (Chatterjee 2020). Modi's speeches on demonetisation exemplify his ability to link the governmental aspect of his populism with the ideological aspect. In the context of demonetisation, Modi used the rhetoric of the corrupt rich versus the poor, identifying himself with the latter to argue that the measure benefitted the common man. In fact, although Modi's justification for demonetisation kept shifting emphasis, a common theme running through almost all his speeches analysed in this paper is how demonetisation helped with the success of government

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8   In Modi's rhetoric, we should consider the difference between being pro-poor (irrespective of one's class) and coming from and belonging to the poor. Modi has used this latter rhetoric of coming from the poor to differentiate himself from Indira Gandhi, who ruled in the 1970s with populist slogans like "garibi hatao" (remove poverty). Modi often reminds his crowds that, unlike Indira Gandhi, who was the daughter of the first prime minister, he comes from the lowest of classes, a mere "chaiwala" (tea-seller). His polemic against the Gandhi-Nehru family (referring to Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi) and the dynastic politics of the Congress Party is an important aspect of his populism, as such polemics help construct the narrative of the establishment (that is, the Congress Party) as the enemy.

9   Governmental populism is what economists studying Latin America in the 1980s and 90s called "economic populism", where populism was identified with the politically driven fiscal irresponsibility of populist leaders.

subsidies for the poor. Thus, in his speeches, Modi often spends a considerable amount of time on the various subsidies and welfare schemes that the government has introduced for the benefit of the poor.

Christophe Jaffrelot (2019) notes that, as opposed to previous elections, Modi was popular among all strata of society in the 2019 general elections, including the poor. Jaffrelot opines that that the massive support the BJP received from the poor is intriguing given the growing inequality across the country and the Modi government's severe undermining of the anti-poverty policies that the previous government had initiated. He further argues that the pro-poor policies introduced by the Modi-led NDA government are more symbolic, rather than actually combating inequality and poverty:

> It is more of a symbolic measure as the poor have no more money than before, but its success reflects one of the strengths of populism: it does not seek to alter social balances, or even to combat inequality, but sends the people a symbolic message. That is precisely how a local BJP cadre sums it up: 'Ujjwala, toilets, Jan Dhan are so popular because they *offer the poor dignity. And they give credit to Modiji for these schemes'* (Jaffrelot 2019: 153, my emphasis).

While reports on the success of these welfare schemes are ambivalent (for instance, Sircar 2021), what is evident is the extensive advertising and publicity of these schemes by the BJP (Jaffrelot 2019; Aiyar 2019). With regard to Modi's welfarist populism, it is important to note, as the prefix "PM" on these schemes indicates, that the centralisation of welfare delivery since Modi came to power in 2014 leads to greater attribution of welfare benefits directly to the Prime Minister (Sircar 2021). Moreover, irrespective of the effectiveness of these welfare schemes, an important aspect of these schemes is that they are projected as offering "dignity" to the poor, as observed in Jaffrelot's (2019) citation of the local BJP cadre.

Even economists who highlight the effectiveness of these welfare measures attribute its success to the *shift* from "rights" of the poor to "dignified standard of living for all" (Bhalla/Bhasin 2022).

5.3 THE POLITICS OF ILLIBERALISM: SOCIAL JUSTICE AS HINDUTVA'S TROJAN HORSE

Following Khaitan (2020), we see how three aspects of Modi's authoritarian populism namely, hyper-nationalism, decisiveness and efficiency, and a welfarist-developmental discourse, were brought together to justify the necessity and success of demonetisation. For Hindutva's illiberal politics, which sees minority religious groups, especially Muslims, as enemies of the Hindu nation ("Hindu *Rashtra"*), the discourse of development and social justice is a convenient trojan horse to reduce minorities to a politically weak or irrelevant position. As already seen, Modi beseeches the common man to endure hardship caused by demonetisation for a short period of time: to "bear pain" for "50 days," in order *for him* to deliver the "India of your dreams" (Modi cited in Indian Express 2016; also see Modi 2016a):

> And I assure the people of the country that the hard work you have done and discomfort you have faced standing in the queue for hours, standing without food, standing in the cold, standing in the sun, even after looking at a board which said that there is no money, you have tolerated this. My countrymen, I will not allow your penance to be wasted (Modi 2016d, official translation from Hindi).

Even as the common man, especially the poor and those working in the informal economy, endured hardship due to the demonetisation exercise, the prime minister argued that this policy was meant for the benefit of the poor and the nation. Upon examination of Modi's public speeches, including his monthly radio programme, the analysis reveals his emphasis on the common man's

"sacrifice" ("महायज्ञ"; "यज्ञ") for the "good" of the nation ("राष्ट्रहित") (for instance, Modi 2016a; Modi 2016h).[10] Modi's radio programme frequently highlights these efforts and sacrifices made by the common man for the benefit of the larger good, that is, the nation. During demonetisation this rhetoric gained renewed emphasis: "The people, through persistence, sweat and toil, have demonstrated to the world, an unparalleled example of citizen sacrifice, for the brighter future of a nation" (Modi, 2016h). These "honest" citizens who endured "pain" were projected as true nationalists, while anyone questioning the demonetisation exercise was criticised as "anti-national". Thus, the government discourse on demonetisation linked this authoritarian measure to its majoritarian, hyper-nationalist vision of society. Modi's *non*-liberal populist politics, centred on the dignity of the common man and the poor, social justice, and development is closely linked to the BJP's majoritarian nationalism, such that anyone questioning or criticising governmental measures can be conveniently labelled anti-national. BJP's "patrimonial welfarism", as Yamini Aiyar observes, strips itself of any emancipatory goals, such as advancing citizenship rights, and instead casts citizens as passive recipients of state largess rather than active citizens claiming rights. It is welfare as "benovelance of the leader to the loyal voter" (Aiyar 2023). Thus, this discursive shift from rights to welfare supports the BJP's Hindutva project by strengthening the illiberal political climate in India.

6 CONCLUSION

Writing on the changes brought about by modernity, Sudipta Kaviraj (2014, ch-2) remarks on the "enchantment of the state" in Indian political thought. He notes that the state-centred view, which dominated for nearly a century (from the 1850s to the 1950s), advocated a comprehensive reliance on the modern state to remake Indian society according to just and democratic principles. In postcolonial India, this statist vision of the "good life" was translated into political possibility by modernist leaders like Nehru and Ambedkar, as they pursued this social transformation agenda through "transformational constitutionalism" (Dasgupta 2014). Through the case study of demonetisation this paper points out that Modi's speeches and the governmental discourse in the past decade show a dramatic shift in the political imaginary of the modern state. In the current neoliberal context, it is *not* the citizen who may claim rights and equality from the state; rather, it is the state that bestows welfare upon the people and may even elicit the common man's "effort" and "sacrifice" for the "good" of the nation. The drastic measure of demonetisation brought this political imaginary to its pinnacle, with the state laying claim to the "honest" citizen's "sacrifice" in the name of national progress.

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10   For the English words "sacrifice" or "penance" Modi often uses Hindu spriritual words ("महायज्ञ"; "यज्ञ"; "तपस्या"), and rarely "त्याग", which is a literal translation for sacrifice. Furthermore, Modi uses words like "राष्ट्रहित", "देशहित" (national interest), and not "जनहित" (public interest).

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