

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde = Archives suisses des traditions populaires  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Volkskunde  
**Band:** 116 (2020)  
**Heft:** 1

**Artikel:** The great sacrifice : Modi, demonetization, and populist style  
**Autor:** Salmi, Jelena  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-880995>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 31.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Great Sacrifice

## Modi, Demonetization, and Populist Style

JELENA SALMI

### Abstract

This article examines Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's affective rhetoric in the context of the 2016 monetary policy known as demonetization. The radical policy entailed the nullification of 86 % of the currency in circulation overnight in an effort to deal with corruption, black money and counterfeit cash. Demonetization was announced by Modi in an unscheduled live television broadcast on 8 November, 2016. This article analyzes the Hindi version of the televised demonetization speech, seeking to describe and understand Modi's populist style and to trace reasons for his popularity. It focuses on two themes, in particular: the use of the common people motif and the mobilization of militaristic, hygienic, and religious metaphors. The article argues that embodied emotions and visceral reactions triggered by means of unequivocal metaphorical language and repetition play a central part in Modi's populist appeal.

*Keywords: demonetization, populism, Modi, emotions, conceptual metaphor, framing*

“Experience tells us that common citizens are always ready to make sacrifices and endure difficulties for the well-being of their country. [...] So, in this war against corruption, black money, fake notes and terrorism, we are ready to suffer minor difficulties for a few days. I have full confidence that every citizen will stand up and participate in this purification of corruption, in this mahāyajña [great sacrifice].”<sup>1</sup>

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his demonetization speech on 8 November, 2016

1 PM Narendra Modi's address to the nation on demonetization of Rs. 500 & Rs. 1000 currency notes. The speech was given in Hindi and in English. The quotes used in this article are the author's translations from the Hindi version. Youtube video, added by Bharatiya Janata Party, 8. 11. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn64Vf6GEoo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn64Vf6GEoo), 30. 12. 2019.

This article examines Narendra Modi's populist style and affective appeals in the context of the 2016 demonetization in India, locally known as *notebandi*. Demonetization was a move aimed at curbing corruption, counterfeit currency, and "black money" (funds concealed from the tax administration) by means of banning all 500- and 1000-rupee notes overnight.<sup>2</sup> The unexpected ban was planned in secret by a small inside circle of Modi, and it was introduced through ordinances that enabled the government to circumvent parliamentary opposition.<sup>3</sup> Due to printing press constraints, the demonetized currency was not immediately replaced, resulting in a drastic cash shortage – new notes were introduced only gradually over the following months.<sup>4</sup>

Demonetization had devastating economic and human impacts. The nullification of 86 % of the country's currency in circulation immediately embodied in the form of serpentine queues squirming outside banks and "No cash"-signs attached to the windows of ATM booths. More than a hundred people lost their lives, many of them due to queuing in heat. Cash-centric sectors like agriculture and fishing were severely affected; unemployment boomed and many small and middle-sized businesses were forced to close their doors.

The policy and its hasty implementation attracted criticism both nationally and internationally. For instance, according to Gita Gopinath, the Chief Economist of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), demonetization was not a good idea in "a country such as India and the level of development it has".<sup>5</sup> A recent publication by economists from the IMF, Harvard University, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), and Goldman Sachs states that a steep decline in currency reduced real economic activity in India while also noting that demonetization may have longer term advantages – the evaluation of possible benefits necessitates further research.<sup>6</sup>

Embarassingly, demonetization did not succeed in eliminating black money, or there was a lot less of it than the Modi government had predicted. In its annual report for 2017–2018, the RBI noted that 99.3 % of the banned currency had returned to the banking system.<sup>7</sup> After this, Modi switched to emphasizing digitalization of the economy instead of the corruption discourse: demonetization did indeed boost noncash payment mechanisms. This strategy worked to his benefit and in the 2019 parliamentary election, two and half years after the banknote demonetization, the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) represented by Modi

2 500 rupees equals 6.90 CHF, 4. 12. 2019.

3 Chakrabarti, Kaustuv; Bandyopadhyay, Kaustuv Kanti: Populism in Contemporary Indian Politics. In: EAI Working Paper Series: Populism in Asia 5. Seoul 2019, p. 1–22, here p. 11.

4 Chodorow-Reich, Gabriel; Gopinath, Gita; Mishra, Prachi; Narayanan, Abhinav: Cash and the Economy. Evidence from India's Demonetization. In: The Quarterly Journal of Economics 135/1 (2019), p. 57–103.

5 Not a single macro economist thinks note ban was a good idea: Gita Gopinath, Business Standard, [www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/not-a-single-macro-economist-thinks-note-ban-was-a-good-idea-gita-gopinath-117122101525\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/not-a-single-macro-economist-thinks-note-ban-was-a-good-idea-gita-gopinath-117122101525_1.html), 1. 2. 2020.

6 Chodorow-Reich, Gopinath, Gabriel; Gita; Mishra, Prachi; Narayanan, Abhinav: Cash and the Economy: Evidence from India's Demonetization. In: The Quarterly Journal of Economics 135/1 (2019), p. 57–103.

7 99.30 % of demonetized money back in the system, says RBI report, The Economic Times, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/finance/after-almost-two-years-of-counting-rbi-says-99-3-of-demonetised-notes-retained/articleshow/65589904.cms.cms>, 24. 10. 2019.



Fig. 1: A signboard in Ahmedabad informing citizens about the nullification of 500- and 1000-rupee notes (Photo: Jelena Salmi).

managed to increase its political appeal to the surprise of many political analysts.<sup>8</sup> In May 2019, Modi commenced his second five-year term as Prime Minister with a landslide victory.

This article examines Modi's populist appeal through an analysis of the Hindi version of his televised 36-minute demonetization speech. The article focuses particularly on Modi's political image-building and affective populist persuasion by means of repetition and metaphorical language. The article begins with a short introduction into the BJP's right-wing-populist rhetoric, including its core notion of Hindutva. It continues with a section that describes the main content and style of Modi's demonetization speech, followed by an analysis of the common-people-motif as against corrupted "elites" catering to "others". Finally, the article analyzes Modi's use of militaristic, hygienic, and religious metaphors that frame demonetization as a necessary action not only for economic vitality, but also for national security and ritual purification while constructing an image of himself as the savior of the Indian nation.

Theoretically, the article draws on George Lakoff's work on the entanglement of cognition, language, and emotions as well as recent anthropological literature that emphasizes the role of affects and emotions in statecraft.<sup>9</sup> As anthropologist

8 India's Modi wins resounding election victory with potent appeal to nationalism, The Washington Post, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/india-election-results-modi-remains-favored-to-win-as-counting-starts/2019/05/22/830b9f60-7cb4-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-election-results-modi-remains-favored-to-win-as-counting-starts/2019/05/22/830b9f60-7cb4-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef_story.html), 10. 2. 2020.

9 Lakoff, George: Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. Chelsea Green

Ann Laura Stoler notes, the affective – often treated merely as a “smokescreen of rule” – constitutes “the substance of politics”;<sup>10</sup> emotions and affects such as fear, pride, hope, and love are at the core of state formation. On the one hand, people experience the state through mundane bureaucratic engagements: queueing in government offices, petitioning the court, and negotiating identification documents. On the other hand, the state becomes experienced and felt through the circulation and intensification of emotions by means of cultural texts, material structures, and public spectacles such as political speeches, party manifestos, slogans, and public works.<sup>11</sup> While this article focuses on one particular speech, it is situated within the wider political context, drawing connections to other political speech-acts including Modi’s 2014 and 2019 election campaigns and recent social media accounts, which have been examined by social scientists Sahana Udupa, Subir Sinha, Sujatha Subramanian, Paula Chakravartty, and Srirupa Roy, among others.<sup>12</sup> Through this analysis, I hope to contribute to a larger conversation about the role of emotions in populist politics,<sup>13</sup> focusing especially on how state-citizen relations are constructed and sustained through affective, visceral language.

2004; Lakoff, George: *Why it Matters How We Frame the Environment*. In: *Environmental Communication* 4/1 (2010), p. 70–81; Begoña, Aretxaga: *A Fictional Reality. Paramilitary Death Squads and the Construction of State Terror in Spain*. In: Jeffrey A. Sluka (ed.): *Death Squad. The Anthropology of State Terror*. Philadelphia 2000, p. 46–69; Laszczkowski, Mateusz; Reeves, Madeleine: *Introduction. Affect and the Anthropology of the State*. In: Mateusz Laszczkowski et al. (eds.): *Affective States. Entanglements, Suspensions, Suspicions*. New York 2018, p. 1–14; Linke, Uli: *Contact Zones. Rethinking the Sensual Life of the State*. In: *Anthropological Theory* 6/2 (2006), p. 205–225; Stoler, Ann Laura: *Affective States*. In: David Nugent et al. (eds.): *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*. Oxford 2004, p. 4–20.

- 10 Stoler, Ann Laura: *Affective States*. In: David Nugent et al. (eds.): *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*. Oxford 2004, p. 6.
- 11 Salmi, Jelena: *Differentiated Citizenship, Displacement, and Materiality in State-Citizen Relations in Ahmedabad*. Jyväskylä 2019; Sharma, Aradhana; Gupta, Akhil: *Introduction. Rethinking Theories of the State in an Age of Globalization*. In: Aradhana Sharma et al. (eds.): *The Anthropology of the State. A Reader*. Malden 2006, p. 1–41.
- 12 Chakravartty, Paula; Roy, Srirupa: *Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi. Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections*. In: *Television & New Media* 16/4 (2015), p. 311–322; Sinha, Subir: *Fragile Hegemony. Modi, Social Media, and Competitive Electoral Populism in India*. In: *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017), p. 4158–4180; Subramanian, Sujatha: *Is Hindutva Masculinity on Social Media Producing A Culture of Violence against Women and Muslims?* In: *Economic & Political Weekly* (online) 54/15 (2019), [www.epw.in/node/154147/pdf](http://www.epw.in/node/154147/pdf); Udupa, Sahana: *Enterprise Hindutva and Social Media in Urban India*. In: *Contemporary South Asia* 26/4 (2018), p. 453–467.
- 13 Demertzis, Nicolas: *Emotions and Populism*. In: Simon Clarke et al. (eds.): *Emotion, Politics and Society*. Basingstoke 2006, p. 103–122; Rico, Guillem; Guinjoan, Marc; Anduiza, Eva: *The Emotional Underpinnings of Populism. How Anger and Fear Affect Populist Attitudes*. In: *Swiss Political Science Review* 23/4 (2017), p. 444–461; Wirz, Dominique S.: *Persuasion Through Emotion? An Experimental Test of the Emotion-Eliciting Nature of Populist Communication*. In: *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018), p. 1114–1138.

## Populist style, emotions, and Hindutva

Populism is often defined as a “thin ideology” (C. Mudde) at the core of which is the separation of society into two antagonistic groups: so-called “elites” and “common people”.<sup>14</sup> Populists claim that they alone can represent the *volonté générale* of the people who are portrayed as pure at heart in distinction to the morally corrupt “elites” and malicious “others”, claimed to conspire with the “elites”.<sup>15</sup> Oftentimes, populist movements are led by strong charismatic leaders presenting themselves as interpreters of the popular will – or even its embodiments. These leaders tend to identify themselves with a “heartland” while the “people” make up the population of this idealized, romanticized construction.<sup>16</sup> The idea of a heartland, then, is strategically used to create the category of “people”. As political scientist Paul Taggart notes, “to understand what any populist means by the ‘people’ we need [...] to understand what they mean by their heartland”.<sup>17</sup>

The BJP’s conception of heartland derives from the party’s core organizing concept, that of Hindutva (being Hindu). The notion was first introduced in the 1920s by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the text *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* and subsequently adopted by the militant Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a progenitor and a close ally of the BJP.<sup>18</sup> In his writings, Savarkar explained that a Hindu is a person whose “holy land” is located “in the Indian soil”. By this definition, only Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and people belonging to various Hindu sects constitute “Hindus” while Christians and Muslims are outsiders in India.<sup>19</sup> By definition, these religious minorities can never be truly Indian as their heartlands are located outside the borders of the subcontinent.

Contemporary Hindu nationalist organizations range from student unions and social service organizations to religious militant groups and political parties.<sup>20</sup> Collectively, they are identified by the umbrella term Sangh Parivar (‘Family of Communities’), and insist on the creation of a Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu nation). This ideological endorsement also underpins the BJP’s national populist rhetoric and policy-making.<sup>21</sup> In the BJP’s discourse, the “people” are characterized as the “Hindu” majority while “elites” constitute the affiliates of the Indian National Congress (known as the Congress), a secular, centrist party that dominated Indian

14 Mudde, Cas: The Populist Zeitgeist. In: *Government and Opposition* 39/4 (2004), p. 542–563; Stanley, Ben: The Thin Ideology of Populism. In: *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13/1 (2008), p. 95–111.

15 Kriesi, Hanspeter; Pappas, Takis: *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*. London 2015; Mudde, Cas: *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. New York 2007; Mudde, Cas; Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal: *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford 2017.

16 Taggart, Paul: Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe. In: *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9/3 (2004), p. 269–288, here p. 274.

17 Taggart (see note 16).

18 Hansen, Thomas Blom: *The Saffron Wave. Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. Princeton 1999, p. 78–79.

19 Hansen (see note 18).

20 Peker, Efe: Religious Populism, Memory, and Violence in India. In: *New Diversities* 21/2 (2019), p. 23–36.

21 Peker (see note 20), p. 24.



politics before the ascension of the BJP in 2014. “Others”, for their part, are equated especially with the Muslim minority, whose belonging and loyalty to the Indian nation is constantly questioned.<sup>22</sup> In Modi’s India, Muslims have become subjects of entrenched discrimination, excised from the imagined national community and from substantive citizenship rights.<sup>23</sup>

When it comes to linguistic and discursive choices, BJP politicians often rely on Islamophobic messages, character attacks, and aggressive, affective rhetoric – a populist tendency that political scientists Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey call “bad manners” in contrast to the “rational” style of technocratic politicians.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, a recent comparative study on the communication style of 195 populist and non-populist candidates competing in national elections worldwide highlighted that populist campaigns, both right-wing and left-wing, are more negative, and contain more character attacks and fear messages.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, emotional appeals of populist leaders have received surprisingly little academic attention despite the so-called affective turn within humanities and social sciences. Existing works on the emotional rhetoric of populist parties and leaders tend to focus on Euro-American contexts.<sup>26</sup> This article aims to fill this gap by focusing on Modi’s use of the common people motif and his way of framing an economic policy using religious, hygienic, and military metaphors.

## 8 November, 2016

“My dear countrymen, I hope the sacred festival of Diwali ended with joy and new hope. Today, I want to make a special announcement to you all. I will share with you some difficult issues and monumental decisions. You may recall the economic situation in May 2014 when you entrusted me with a great responsibility. In the context of BRICS, it was being said that the *I* in BRICS was shaky. Since then, we had two years of severe drought. Yet, in the last two and a half years with the support of 125 crore<sup>27</sup> Indians, India has become a *bright spot* [in English] or a

22 Peker (see note 20), p. 24.

23 Salmi, Jelena: Differentiated Citizenship, Displacement, and Materiality in State-Citizen Relations in Ahmedabad. Jyväskylä 2019, p. 189.

24 Moffitt, Benjamin; Tormey, Simon: Rethinking Populism. Politics, Mediatization and Political Style. In: Political Studies 62/2 (2013), p. 392; Moffitt, Benjamin: The Global Rise of Populism. Performance, Political Style, and Representation. Stanford 2016, p. 46.

25 Nai, Alessandro: Fear and Loathing in Populist Campaigns? Comparing the Communication Style of Populists and Non-populists in Elections Worldwide. In: Journal of Political Marketing (2018), p. 1–32.

26 Aalberg, Toril; Esser, Frank; Reinemann, Carsten; Strömbäck, Jesper; de Vreese, Claes H. (eds.): Populist Political Communication in Europe. New York 2016; Prior, Alex; van Hoef, Yuri (eds.): Interdisciplinary Approaches to Studying Emotions within Politics and International Relations. In: Politics and Governance 6/4 (2018); Salmela, Mikko; von Scheve, Christian: Emotional Roots of Right-wing Political Populism. In: Social Science Information 56/4 (2017), p. 567–595.

27 The terms crore and lakh are commonly used in the Indian numbering system. One crore denotes ten million whereas one lakh equals one hundred thousand.

twinkling star in the global economy. It is not just us who are saying this; it is being stated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.”<sup>28</sup>

A week after the Hindu festival of Diwali in November 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the Indian nation in an unscheduled live television broadcast. He was dressed in his signature attire: a kurta with a Chinese collar, and an Indian waistcoat once known as the Nehru jacket but renamed by his followers as “NaMo jacket”.<sup>29</sup> Standing behind a lectern adorned with the government coat of arms, Modi lauded how India had become a “bright spot” in the global economy with the support of the citizens. He also emphasized that his government, elected in May 2014, had been committed to empowering farmers, villages, and the poor through various schemes and policies, including a scheme aimed at ensuring access to banking services for all. Then, with a stern look on his face, Modi went on to talk about “diseases” (*bīmāriyā*) that hinder governmental efforts to remove poverty: corruption (*bhraṣṭācār*) and black money (*kālā dhan*). According to him, these illicit practices were particularly prevalent among “certain classes of people” with the habit of “ignoring the rights of the poor”: “My dear countrymen, in the past decades diseases like corruption and black money have rooted themselves in our country. Corruption and black money: these puzzles are the biggest obstacles for removing poverty. [...] The disease of corruption is particularly prevalent among certain classes of people due to their selfishness. They have been able to flourish by ignoring the rights of the poor. Some people have misused their position for personal gains. At the same time, honest people have been fighting against this. Crores of citizens have shown that they live with integrity.”<sup>30</sup>

The speech continued with a lengthy discussion on how corruption, forged currency, and black money, along with the closely-connected “horror of terrorism”, were damaging India’s economy and harming its honest, “common citizens” (*sāmānya nāgrīk*). Modi also talked about how his government had sought to battle corruption through new schemes and laws, and how corruption worsens inflation and affects the purchasing power of the poor and the middle-classes: “You may yourself have experienced this when buying land or a house. Apart from the amount paid by cheque, a large sum is demanded in cash. If an honest person, a middle-class person wants to buy property and he doesn’t have black money, he is in trouble.”<sup>31</sup> After that, he came to the central message of the speech, announcing what has since become known as the 2016 demonetization drive: “Sisters and brothers, to liberate the country from the termites [*dīmak*] of corruption and black money, one more strict measure has become necessary. Today at midnight, 8 November 2016, 500- and 1000-rupee notes will no longer be legal tender. The old

28 PM Narendra Modi’s address to the nation on demonetization of Rs. 500 & Rs. 1000 currency notes. Youtube video, added by Bharatiya Janata Party, 8. 11. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn64Vf-6GEoo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn64Vf-6GEoo), 30. 12. 2019.

29 Salmi (see note 23), p. 87.

30 PM Narendra Modi’s address to the nation on demonetization of Rs. 500 & Rs. 1000 currency notes. Youtube video, added by Bharatiya Janata Party, 8. 11. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn64Vf-6GEoo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn64Vf-6GEoo), 30. 12. 2019.

31 See note 30.



500- and 1000-rupee notes hoarded by anti-national [desh virodhī] and anti-social [samāj virodhī] elements engaged in the business of corruption, black money, and counterfeit currency will become nothing more than pieces of paper. The rights and interests of citizens who have earned their property honestly through hard work will be fully protected.”<sup>32</sup>

Modi then announced that all the smaller notes and coins would remain legal tender and that people could deposit their old notes in banks or post offices over the ensuing fifty days. He continued that banks and ATMs would remain closed for two days, after which there would be daily and weekly cash withdrawal limits to ensure the dispersal of new notes to all. Then, towards the end of his speech, Modi reached out to common people asking them to bear with him through difficult times that would eventually lead to India's progress. According to him, demonetization would enable common citizens to finally get their rightful share of the economy. The speech ended with an appeal to people: “The more you support this process [places his hands together, palms touching, J. S.], the more successful the purification will be [raises his index finger, J. S.].” Modi stated how he was convinced that “honest citizens” of India would always choose “putting up with inconvenience” over “accepting corruption”. After all, demonetization would benefit the poor and harm precisely those who deprive them of their rights: “One more time, let me invite you to cleanse our country and contribute to the success of this mahāyajña, just as you cleaned up your house and your neighborhood during the festival of Diwali. In such a large country, let us ignore the inconvenience caused by such a big festival of cleanliness and celebrate this Diwali of purity. Let us show the fervor of India's honesty to the whole world, celebrate the festival of authenticity throughout the country to curb corruption. Crack down black money, destroy the game of counterfeit currency, so that the country's money can be used for the benefit of the poor, for them to get their fair share in the prosperity of the country. Let us enable upcoming generations to live their lives with dignity. I have full confidence in all of you, hundreds of millions of countrymen. With your help, I can take further this fight against corruption. I believe that your cooperation will be an inspiration for future generations. I once again express my heartfelt gratitude to you. Victory to Mother India!”<sup>33</sup>

### From Hindutva firebrand to common man

With his assertive, strong-willed rhetorical style and body language, Modi comes across as a dominant, determined persona. This style was developed during his 12-year-long period of rule as the longest-serving chief minister of Gujarat State. During this period, his political discourse progressed from an overtly Hindu nationalist focus to the economic development of Gujarat, and culminated in the

<sup>32</sup> See note 30.

<sup>33</sup> See note 30.

branding of himself as the development man (*vikās puruṣ*).<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the trademark of chief minister Modi was the combination of religion, development, and regional pride. In the words of historian Tommaso Bobbio, Modi “managed to present himself as the symbol of an Indian-style pattern of development by successfully mixing three ingredients: religion, nationalism (often defined in regional terms), and ‘modernity’.”<sup>35</sup>

When Modi became the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate in 2014, he had to scale up his political rhetoric from the subnational level to appeal to wider audiences. As an electoral strategy, he emphasized his background as a tea vendor, thereby locating himself on a par with the common man and in opposition to the “elitist” and “corrupted” Congress.<sup>36</sup> Aside from the crusade against corrupted elites, neoliberal economic modernization – exemplified by the so-called “Gujarat Model” – assumed the central stage in the BJP’s parliamentary campaign. As Chakravartty and Roy state, “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.”<sup>37</sup>

After his ascension to Prime Minister, Modi has continued to build up an image of himself as a strong leader committed to economic development, on the one hand, and a humble tea vendor, on the other. The story of Modi’s journey from a modest tea vendor to the top of political life has also been reproduced in Bollywood: In the wake of the 2019 election, a biographical film titled *PM Narendra Modi* was due to be released, but the Election Commission banned it.<sup>38</sup> Across the top of the official movie poster were the words “Patriotism is my power” (*Deshbhakti hī merī shakti hai*).<sup>39</sup> Around the same time, a trailer of a ten-episode web series titled *Modi: Journey of a Common Man* was released on India’s highest grossing streaming platform Eros Now. However, the Election Commission directed Eros Now to stop streaming it during polls.<sup>40</sup>

34 Pal, Jyojeet; Chandra, Priyank; Vydiswaran, V G Vinod: Twitter and the Rebranding of Narendra Modi. In: *Economic & Political Weekly* 51/8 (2016), p. 52–60, here p. 53.

35 Bobbio, Tommaso: Never-ending Modi. *Hindutva and Gujarati Neoliberalism as Prelude to All-India Premiership?* In: Focaal. *Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 67 (2013), p. 123–134, here p. 125.

36 Jaffrelot, Christophe; Martelli, Jean Thomas: Reading PM Modi, Through His Speeches. In: *The Indian Express*, 15. 8. 2017, indianexpress.com/article/explained/reading-pm-modi-through-his-speeches-independence-day-4796963, 30. 12. 2019.

37 Chakravartty, Paula; Roy, Srirupa: Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi. *Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections*. In: *Television & New Media* 16/4 (2015), p. 311–322, here p. 312.

38 EC ban on Modi biopic applies to NaMo TV, cannot be aired during polls: EC official, *India Today*, www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/election-commission-namo-tv-ban-modi-biopic-1498625-2019-04-10, 28. 12. 2019.

39 PM Narendra Modi first poster: Vivek Oberoi is a spitting image of the prime minister, *India Today*, www.indiatoday.in/movies/bollywood/story/pm-narendra-modi-first-poster-vivek-oberoi-is-a-spitting-image-of-the-prime-minister-1425405-2019-01-07, 28. 12. 2019.

40 Election Commission bans web series on PM Narendra Modi, *India Today*, www.indiatoday.in/television/web-series/story/election-commission-bans-web-series-on-pm-narendra-modi-1506239-2019-04-20, 28. 12. 2019.

Modi's speeches have frequently featured words such as "sister," "brother," "mother," "people," and "we," in line with his family-oriented variant of populist rhetoric.<sup>41</sup> To communicate with "his" people, Modi has preferred direct forms of communication over interaction with the traditional media.<sup>42</sup> These include Twitter, the NaMo mobile app, and the monthly "Matters of mind" radio program (*Mann ki baat*). As Subir Sinha notes in his cyberethnographic study of Modi's 2014 general election campaign, social media played an important part in the BJP's win: "Indian populism today would be virtually unimaginable without media and social media".<sup>43</sup> In January 2017, the BJP tweeted that Modi has become "the world's most followed leader on social media".<sup>44</sup> The unscheduled live television broadcast used to announce demonetization fits well with Modi's preference for unmediated communication while at the same time reinforcing his image as a strong leader who steers the media instead of being at its mercy.

In the demonetization speech, Modi addresses Indian citizens as "sisters and brothers" five times and as "countrymen" or "my dear countrymen" nine times. The notion of "common man" or "common citizen" features seven times. Modi defines the common citizen as someone who is hard-working and honest, but is not getting his rightful share in the country's economic progress due to "certain classes of people". He also gives examples of the integrity of "common citizens": "poor autorickshaw drivers returning gold ornaments left in their vehicles", "taxi drivers using their own money to locate the owners of luggage and cell phones left behind", and "vegetable vendors and simple shopkeepers returning excess money given accidentally by customers."<sup>45</sup> Notably, he does not define the common man as belonging to a certain religion nor does he explicitly bring up the common Hindu nationalist discourse of pseudo-secular elites appeasing the (Muslim) minority at the cost of the Hindu majority.<sup>46</sup> Here, Modi portrays the common man simply as a struggling and honest figure.

Modi connects corruption and terrorism to actions of two groups of people: "certain classes of people" who "misuse their position for personal gains" and "enemies entering across the border". A similarity is established between these two groups, portrayed as "anti-national", "anti-social", and evil as against the pure

41 Jaffrelot, Christophe; Martelli, Jean Thomas: Reading PM Modi, Through His Speeches. In: The Indian Express, 15. 8. 2017, indianexpress.com/article/explained/reading-pm-modi-through-his-speeches-independence-day-4796963, 30. 12. 2019.

42 Kinnvall, Catarina: Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Hindutva. Modi and the Masculinization of Indian Politics. In: Cambridge Review of International Affairs 32/3 (2019), p. 283–302; Sen, Ronojoy: Narendra Modi's Makeover and the Politics of Symbolism. In: Journal of Asian Public Policy 9/2 (2016), p. 98–111.

43 Sinha, Subir: Fragile Hegemony. Modi, Social Media, and Competitive Electoral Populism in India. In: International Journal of Communication 11 (2017), p. 4158–4180, here p. 4178.

44 Sinha, Subir: Fragile Hegemony. Modi, Social Media, and Competitive Electoral Populism in India. In: International Journal of Communication 11 (2017), p. 4158–4180, here p. 4158.

45 PM Narendra Modi's address to the nation on demonetization of Rs. 500 & Rs. 1000 currency notes. Youtube video, added by Bharatiya Janata Party, 8. 11. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn64Vf-6GEoo, 30. 12. 2019.

46 Chacko, Priya: The Right Turn in India. Authoritarianism, Populism and Neoliberalisation. In: Journal of Contemporary Asia 48/4 (2018), p. 541–565.

and honest common people, whose anger appears legitimate and righteous. Importantly, the terms “certain classes of people”, “enemies entering across the border”, and “anti-nationals” are all imprecise notions susceptible to multiple interpretations. Hence, they appear as what political theorist Ernesto Laclau calls “floating signifiers”; notions that absorb meanings that hearers want to impose.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, “certain classes of people” can comprise political, academic, media, entertainment, and business elites, according to hearers’ interpretations. “Enemies entering across the borders” can refer to Pakistani terrorists, but also to Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, often termed “foreigners”, “infiltrators”,<sup>48</sup> and even “termites”.<sup>49</sup> “Anti-national”, for its part, is even more elusive: During Modi’s reign, it has been directed at anyone critical of government practices or expressing worry about the growth of religious intolerance in the country.<sup>50</sup> The effectiveness of floating signifiers in political rhetoric lies precisely in this haziness that enables people to project their fears and frustrations – this makes them powerful political tools.

## Framing demonetization

Reason is 98% unconscious, posits Lakoff<sup>51</sup> echoing the view of cognitive neuroscientist Michael S. Gazzaniga.<sup>52</sup> Everyday language is filled with metaphors that often go unnoticed, but nevertheless affect the ways in which we make sense of the world. Put differently, we think and act in terms of neural circuits called “frames” and their patterned activation through language. Lakoff’s point is that our ways of understanding the world are physically represented in the conceptual systems in our brains: thought is embodied. Conceptual metaphors such as CORRUPTION IS DISEASE and CORRUPTION IS TERMITE that can be traced from Modi’s demonetization speech, shape the way hearers think and act – in this case, the metaphors persuade Indian citizens to perceive corruption as an abnormal condition in the body and a home-invading insect, respectively. This has important political implications: Words and visual imagery can be used strategically to activate desired frames and to build up new frames over time. Within embodied cognition, this process is known as framing.

According to Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of embodied cognition, there is no hierarchical distinction between mind and body or reason and emotions; rather,

47 Laclau, Ernesto: *On Populist Reason*. London 2005.

48 Shamshad, Rizwana: *Bangladeshi Migrants in India: Foreigners, Refugees, or Infiltrators?* Oxford 2017.

49 Illegal immigrants are like termites, will throw them out if BJP comes back to power: Amit Shah, *India Today*, [www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/bjp-amit-shah-hindu-refugees-mamata-bannerjee-1499691-2019-04-11](http://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/bjp-amit-shah-hindu-refugees-mamata-bannerjee-1499691-2019-04-11), 24. 10. 2019.

50 Salmi, Jelena: *Differentiated Citizenship, Displacement, and Materiality in State-Citizen Relations in Ahmedabad*. Jyväskylä 2019, p. 34.

51 Lakoff, George: *Why it Matters How We Frame the Environment*. In: *Environmental Communication* 4/1 (2010), p. 72.

52 Gazzaniga, Michael S.: *The Mind’s Past*. Berkeley 1998, p. 21.

these aspects are tied to each other.<sup>53</sup> Lakoff explains that emotions play an essential part in ideological framing since people will negate or simply ignore information that does not fit their existing system of frames consisting of emotions, metaphors, and narratives. In order to make sense rationally, ideas and language must appeal to embodied emotions, they must persistently persuade over a long period of time. The more ideological language is repeated, the more the brain circuits – and cognitive patterns – are strengthened.<sup>54</sup> Through repetition, what may once have seemed strange or against common sense slowly becomes accepted and normal, part of the cognitive perception of the social environment. As linguist Jonathan Charteris-Black posits, metaphors are suitable for ideological purposes since they trigger unconscious emotional associations: “[M]etaphors contribute to mental representations of political issues, making alternative ways of understanding these issues more difficult and in so doing ‘occupy’ the mind.”<sup>55</sup>

In the demonetization speech, Modi refers to corruption, black money, and fake notes as cancers, diseases, and termites – internal threats that live inside the body or inside the house. He claims that these are the reasons for common people not getting their rightful share, as they increase inflation and are closely connected to terrorism. As Moffitt and Tormey posit, perpetuating a state of crisis and advocating clear-cut solutions is one of the key features of populist style: “That which gets in the way of addressing ‘the issue’ or the ‘crisis’ has to be ignored, supplanted or removed”.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, political persuasion is even more effective when it has an “extra emotional ingredient”.<sup>57</sup> In Modi’s speech, the body and the house are paralleled with the body politic “infested” by corruption and terrorism. The speech arouses a sense of urgency by means of bodily and affective metaphors.

Talking about what should be done to corruption and terrorism, Modi uses various notions, blending militaristic, hygienic, and religious vocabulary. He presents the eradication of corruption as a visceral purification and a heroic military undertaking, not just a distant and “rational” economic policy. Demonetization is framed as weapon (shastr), battle (ladai), war (jang), cleaning (safai), purification (suddhikaran), and, finally, mahāyajña, an ancient Vedic ritual for the purification of the world (Figure 2). Mahāyajña (“great sacrifice”) is a purposeful action to end chaos and to restore balance in the universe, traditionally involving fire rituals and sacrifices performed by Brahman priests. When framed this way through metaphorical language, demonetization becomes not only desired but also an absolutely necessary policy: without it, everyday life will be consumed by violence, dirtiness, disease, and chaos.

53 Lakoff, George; Johnson, Mark: *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago 1980.

54 Lakoff (see note 51), p. 73.

55 Charteris-Black, Jonathan: *Politicians and Rhetoric. The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*. Basingstoke 2011, p. 28.

56 Moffitt, Benjamin; Tormey, Simon: *Rethinking Populism. Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style*. In: *Political Studies* 62/2 (2013), p. 392.

57 Canovan, Margaret: *Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy*. In: *Political Studies* 47/1 (1999), p. 2–16, here p. 6.



CORRUPTION IS DISEASE (BĪMĀRĪ) CANCER (NĀSŪR) TERMITE (DĪMAK)	DEMONETIZATION IS BATTLE (LADĀĪ) WAR (JANG) CLEANING (SAFĀĪ) PURIFICATION (ŚUDDHIKARAN) MAHĀYAJÑĀ
---	---

Fig. 2: Conceptual metaphors used by Modi to frame corruption and demonetization.

Importantly, however, the speech does not only focus on perpetuating a sense of internal threat and persuading people to act accordingly. It is also a part of Modi's image-building, the making of brand Modi. Through the speech, Modi constructs himself as a Brahman priest that restores balance in the world, an overtly masculine military leader who blows up his enemies, a surgeon who operates cancer, a pest control expert who exterminates termites, and an activist for a clean and hygienic environment. Indeed, some of these images were reproduced in Modi's 2019 parliamentary campaign titled *MaiBhiChowkidar* ("I, too, am a watchman") and the related music video of the same name. In the *MaiBhiChowkidar* video, there is a scene where two policemen hold down a man wearing a black suit while his bookkeeping is being checked. In another scene, Modi can be seen steering an army tank. The video begins with Modi saying in Hindi, "Rest assured, this watchman of yours is alert in every way".<sup>58</sup> As Subramanian argues, *MainBhiChowkidar*-campaign constructs a discourse of Hindu masculinity incorporating ideas of "technological progress, military might, and physical strength [...] all deployed in the service of the protection and progress of the nation".<sup>59</sup> All these ideas are ultimately embodied in the figure of Modi.

In sum, Modi represents himself as a masculine national hero defending respectable society against dirt, corruption, and violence on many areas of social life – an image that resonates with the cult of the supercop reproduced in Indian TV series and Bollywood films. In the demonetization speech, Modi urges common Indians to fight corruption and terrorism for the national interest (*rashtr hit*). By supporting Modi and his policies, one comes to promote the common good, while resistance appears as a traitorous, anti-national act that undermines the interests of the common people. Seen from this perspective, opposition to both demonetization and Modi starts to appear irrational, against one's own good and the common sense.

58 *Main Bhi Chowkidar*, Youtube video, added by Bharatiya Janata Party, 15. 3. 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eaqlt6lrfE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eaqlt6lrfE), 30. 12. 2019.

59 Subramanian, Sujatha: *Is Hindutva Masculinity on Social Media Producing A Culture of Violence against Women and Muslims?* In: *Economic & Political Weekly* (online) 54/15 (2019), [www.epw.in/node/154147/pdf](https://www.epw.in/node/154147/pdf).

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed on the mobilization of affect in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's demonetization speech. I have focused on two themes, in particular: the use of the common people motif and the mobilization of affective metaphorical language. I have suggested that Modi's conceptual metaphors such as CORRUPTION IS DISEASE and CORRUPTION IS TERMITE bring the purported threat under the skin and inside the house. Through emotional metaphorical language, Modi brings a sense of immediacy and urgency; corruption has to be dealt right now with strict measures in the same way that one would deal with a parasitic infection. Conceptual metaphors such as DEMONETIZATION IS WAR, DEMONETIZATION IS CLEANING, DEMONETIZATION IS MAHĀYAJÑA and DEMONETIZATION IS PURIFICATION collapse together complex ideas of national security, environmental cleanliness, ritual purity, religious identity, and economic viability, making demonetization seem like a desirable and, ultimately, an absolutely necessary move. Modi also used the speech as a tool to construct himself as an embodiment of the common will and a manly national hero defending respectable society against vices – he alone can cleanse the country, and free it from internal and external threats that undermine the rights of the common man. As I have shown, this discourse was repeated in the context of Modi's 2019 election campaign *MaiBhiChowkidar*. In sum, I argue that the roots of Narendra Modi's populist appeal lie partly in his oratorical virtuosity, especially his strategic ability to mobilize, intensify, and reroute people's genuine emotions and affects through equivocal conceptual metaphors that invoke embodied, visceral reactions to his policies.