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Modi à la mode: Narendra Modi's fashion and the performance of populist leadership

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ABSTRACT

Examining the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's performative approach to politics, this study offers an interpretation of populism as a style of governing. Central to this style is the visual appearance of the populist leader, heavily coded by their manner of dressing. The article offers an analysis of the ways in which the Indian Prime Minister uses fashion and clothes to articulate three fundamental features of populist leadership: the appeal and identification with the people, the anti-elitist discourse, and the presentation of the leader as saviour. I call these the performance of ordinariness, of difference and of extra-ordinariness. The article demonstrates how, by employing various polysemic sartorial choices, Modi's modulated performance of populism has been critical to his electoral success and in broadening the appeal of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

KEYWORDS Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); Narendra Modi; politics of dress; India; populism

The presentation of the self in politics has always been important. Still, in today's context of 'expanded media visibility and scrutiny' (Corner & Pels, 2008, p. 6) and personalisation of politics, this aspect is becoming increasingly significant. With the decline of ideologies, the erosion of old markers of political affiliation, and the rise of post-modern, post-ideological mediated forms of mobilisation and participation, politics has become more spectacular, resulting in changes in the ways in which the popular vote is won and popular sentiments are mobilised. Magnified by the information revolution and the spread of social media, matters of aesthetic and style have become more prominent (Corner & Pels, 2008, p. 2). Clothes are powerfully evocative and 'the most direct, ubiquitous and ... significant aesthetic form of the

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political' (Behnke, 2017, p. 2). And while people may not be exactly voting for a candidate's wardrobe (Bain, 2016), 'fashion is often implicated in the performance of power and authority' (Weldes, 2017, p. xiv). It is 'a highly charged site for performing politics' (Roces & Edwards, 2007, p. 16). Political leaders often consciously manipulate dress to mobilise support and legitimise their policies (Roces & Edwards, 2007, p. 14). Through dress, they make 'visual statements' (Kiddle et al., 2010, p. 194) to remind the people that 'they understand their values and lifestyle in addition to their political views' (Bain, 2016). This is true in India where the shift of attention towards personalities and away from parties, ideologies and policies was accentuated by the media liberalisation of the 1990s that transformed political communication and the ways in which electoral campaigns are run and won (Sharma, 2022, p. 68). There too, aspects of political style – 'affect, body language and looks, dress code and other stage props of political performance' (Corner & Pels, 2008, p. 16) – have been playing an increasing role as markers of the political experience.

This article is a study of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'dress performances' (Conway, 2017, p. 161). Modi is certainly not the first politician to make political statements through his clothes. Contemporary populist leaders around the world as well as former Indian prime ministers and other provincial leaders have made extensive political use of their sartorial style. In fact, the power of clothing as a communication device has long been understood, especially in India. During the colonial period, clothing quickly acquired important political meanings and was weaved into nationalist, anti-colonial agitations (Tarlo, 1996). Modi is the successful, modern-day equivalent of the leader as a semiotician (like M. K. Gandhi was), a leader for whom nothing is left to chance, and everything carries important symbolic meanings. Building upon his image, layer by layer, Modi – like Gandhi – experiments with clothing.¹ More specifically, this article is about the ways in which the Indian Prime Minister uses fashion and clothes to articulate three fundamental features of populist leadership: the appeal and identification with the people, the anti-elite orientation, and the representation of a strong and effective leadership. Or what I call here: the performance of ordinariness, difference and extra-ordinariness.

This article argues that Modi's populism is grounded not simply in his communicative strategies, mediated populism (Jaffrelot, 2013; Chakravarty & Roy, 2015; Rajagopal, 2015; Sinha, 2017), or in how he short-circuits institutions and centralises power (Tillin & Jaffrelot, 2017); not even in the ethno-nationalist character of his brand of populism (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019), but also in the ways in which he *performs* and *enacts* his populist credentials (Moffitt, 2016) through his appearance and the persuasive communicative power of fashion. The approach adopted here shares affinities with those who argue that populism is 'a spectacle, a show', something that

'can be studied empirically by looking at (...) the performance and praxis of politicians' (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 74, 92), a thing 'that is *performed and enacted*' (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 388; italics in the original), and a political style (Moffitt, 2016). Here I borrow from Butler's concept of performativity and argue that Modi's reproduction of a particular form of populist leadership is a fabrication 'manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means' (1999, p. 173). This article shows that the aesthetic and performative features of politics are increasingly central to analyses of political processes (Corner & Pels, 2008). With the consolidation of personalistic, person-centred or even celebrity politics now an 'inherent and inevitable feature of mass politics' (Corner & Pels 2008, p. 9) politics has thus become 'the business of selling [not products but] people and performances' (Street, 2008, p. 90). At the heart of the analysis proposed here is therefore an examination of what Ostiguy calls 'connotated praxis' (or ways of expressing oneself) that pays attention to 'concrete bodies (on the public stage)' and to crucial elements of political performances – 'behaviour, body language, expression, even dress codes' – and other ways of self-presentation (Ostiguy, 2017, pp. 81, 84, 91; Moffitt, 2016).

The article is divided as follows. After a brief survey of the relationship between fashion and populism, the article develops the argument of populism as a performance by dealing with three elements of populist leadership: the performance of ordinariness, of difference and of extraordinariness through fashion and other forms of self-presentation. It will show how Modi's sartorial choices assist him in his performance of populism and argue that an approach that privileges the study of a leader's connotated praxis offers a better conceptualisation of populist phenomena. Contributing to the literature on populism as spectacle and performance, this article adds to our understanding of dress and fashion in political life (Conway, 2017, p. 162, Behnke, 2017, p. 6).

Populism – the presentation of the self

While personalistic leadership is not *the sine qua non* for the existence of populist movements, it functions as a facilitator for populist mobilisation (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 377 and 2017, p. 43) and is the premier 'vehicle for the promotion and establishment of populist ideas' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 379). Although there is no specific archetype (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014), populist leaders are predominantly male. They tend to be fighting heroes, boastful and decisive figures. Even female populist leaders tend to project an idea of manliness – embodying typical images of popular masculinity, or what Ostiguy calls the 'leader with balls' (2017, p. 82). When attempting to personify the people, populist leaders adopt 'cultural elements that are considered markers of the values and the traditions

that supposedly characterise this community' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 10), and that are expressions of a 'native grammar' (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 92). They are colourful, flamboyant characters, often displaying folksy and 'popular tastes' (Ostiguy 2017, p. 78), showing off and asserting their localist belonging. The political culture of the society in which the populist leader operates and the host ideology associated with that particular brand of populism (such as nativist or leftist) (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) equally dictate the repertoires of self-presentation available to the populist leader.

As populism often 'requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary of people' (Taggart, 2000, p. 1), 'the styling of the self' (Corner & Pels, 2008, p. 10) and performances associated with dress (Parkins, 2002, p. 2) play a decisive role in populist politics. Clothes are used to 'shorten the distance between the legitimate authority and the people' to bring a 'fusion between the leader and the masses' (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 82–83), as can be seen in Cardenás' gabardine suits and Chavez's olive fatigues and tracksuit. By presenting a '(C)arefully crafted image of *vox populi*, based on a combination of outsider status and authenticity' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 77) the populist leader is thus a skilful actor who modulates various impersonations such as a man of the people or the messianic hero. In what follows, I discuss how Modi modulates his impersonations of populist leadership through dress performances by first presenting his identification with the people in his performance of ordinariness. This section will be followed by an examination of his articulation of difference and presentation of the self as a leader and an icon of change. It will then move on to describe how the Indian Prime Minister seeks to present himself, in his performance of extraordinariness, as a competent technocrat and India's messianic saviour, before concluding that Modi has successfully articulated his populist leadership through choreographed presentations of himself.

Performance of ordinariness – the identification with the people

A central populist trope is the division of society into two antagonistic groups: the people and the elite (Mudde, 2017, p. 29). The people are not a predefined social group (Moffitt, 2016, p. 101). There is no precise definition, no distinct ethnic, racial or class attributes (Moffitt, 2016, p. 99). Rather, they are a construct, an idealised conception of the community (Taggart, 2000), an 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 2005). It is only through representations of mediated versions of it – accompanied by potent symbolisms – that the people are represented as a homogeneous and cohesive whole (Moffitt, 2016, p. 104). Yet, the people tend to be identified with the common and humble classes. This broad class concept combines socio-economic status and appeals to popular cultural traditions and values (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). They are conceived

as pure, the sole authentic source of political legitimacy and, ultimately, of sovereignty. They are the truest representatives of the (civic or ethnic) nation (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Therefore, direct appeals to the people and association with the people are some of the uncontested features of populist politics and leadership (Moffitt, 2016, p. 95). Specifically, it is the performance of ordinariness that sustains populist leaders in their attempts to appear as the people. Populist leaders often strive to be seen as simple, down-to-earth individuals by showing their passion for popular sports, or by being seen eating and drinking at popular, affordable joints. Because populism 'claims to represent the truest, authentic, and more deserving part of the homeland', populist leaders adopt nativist styles to demonstrate their 'localist belonging and cultural practices' (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 76).

Hindutva, the Hindu nationalist ideology Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ascribe to, proposes a nativist conception of the people (Tillin & Jaffrelot, 2017). Blurring class and caste lines, the people are defined by their cultural identity as Hindus – not as the poor nor the peasants – who were denied their rightful social, economic, political and cultural place. Since his days as Gujarat chief minister, Modi has assiduously cultivated his populist leadership credentials by promoting an image of himself as the *aam aadmi* (common man), saying that the acronym CM stood not for Chief Minister but for 'common man' instead (Jaffrelot, 2016, p. 200–201). In those years, he aimed at casting himself as the archetypal Gujarati, stressing his vegetarianism and appearing clothed in Gujarat outfits (Jaffrelot 2016, p. 202). But having joined national politics, Modi has increased his pan-Indian appeal by stressing his plebeian background, projecting the image of a man whose origins and upbringing were not too different from many other Indians.²

Modi has turned his humble beginning into a great asset in his performance of ordinariness since 2014. Modi refers often to his youth spent selling tea with his father at a small train station and has amplified this aspect of his life. For instance, he filed his nomination papers for the 2014 general elections accompanied by a local tea vendor who was also one of the 4000 guests invited at Modi's swearing in ceremony in May 2014, a visual testament to the remarkable rise of Modi, from tea seller to prime minister. During the popular *Chai pe Charcha* (literally, 'conversations over tea') during the 2014 election campaign Modi enacted his life story. Sipping tea with fellow tea sellers at roadside tea-stalls, he interacted with the audience on-site and virtually with other people gathered at other tea stalls across India. By the time the campaign closed, the *charchas* had reached 500 cities and 4000 tea stalls (Price, 2015, pp. 129–130). When in 2014 the Congress politician Mani Shankar Aiyar, mocked Modi's ambitions (Firstpost, 2014), Modi capitalised on it stressing even more his humble origins and strengthening his identification with the people and the Indian poor: 'They

do not like it if a *chai wallah* (a tea seller), a son of a poor mother, walks with his head held high. The Congress has insulted the poor, mocked my origins as a tea seller' (Ghosh, 2014). Beyond spinning the story of his humble beginning, the Indian Prime Minister used other strategies to promote his *aam aadmi* image. Crucial for strengthening his performance of ordinariness has been his privileging of Hindi (and Gujarati) over English in his public appearances. Often described as a strong orator, Modi speaks a language that is grounded in a common idiom. He makes ample use of metaphors and catchy slogans, employing an immediate language that the common people can identify with and understand. His English, in contrast, is stilted. Along with the projection of his image as a common man, campaigning in 2014 Modi increasingly made populist appeals by publicly championing the rights of the Indian poor (Palshikar & Sure, 2015). Also, this was the first time that explicit appeals to caste identity were made by a BJP leader who claimed he was coming from their midst (Jaffrelot, 2015b, p. 25).

Clothes feature prominently in Modi's performance of ordinariness. Transformational or charismatic leadership 'often involves eliminating boundaries between leaders and followers' (Tarlo, 1996, p. 57). Like M. K. Gandhi before him, Modi 'performed his beliefs in the values of his followers' by choosing to wear their clothes. The Indian Prime Minister cultivates the image of a man of the people by deliberately donning everyday clothes, made mainly of common fabrics. He is usually seen in public wearing long *kurta* tunics over *pyjama* trousers or tight-fitting *churidar* (leggings), sometimes with a waistcoat. Many other politicians before him had made similar appeals through clothes. Indeed, the Congress' uniform of white, *khadi-kurta-pyjama* was similarly chosen to symbolise humbleness and closeness to the people during the anti-colonial agitation and in the post-colonial independence period, so much so that it quickly became the unofficial uniform of Indian politicians.³ This dress code continues to carry a wealth of rich significations. Reminiscent of that anti-colonial struggle, it is a visible sign of adherence to the principles at the heart of the idea of India. The white of the *kurtas* (or *dhotis* in the south) symbolised the honesty, purity and dedication to the nation. At the same time, the indigenous roots and character of the whole ensemble outwardly signals closeness to the masses. Significantly, this livery of the national politician had remained pretty much uncontested until the 1990s.

Modi's dress sense certainly builds on this rich tradition of self-presentation. Yet his attention to his clothes and his image must also be understood by taking into account the changes in the sartorial sensibilities of Indian politicians which were the product of both the gradual process of economic liberalisation and the increasing mediatisation of politics of the early 1990s. Both phenomena influenced how Indian politicians dealt with their public appearances in significant ways. The 'satellite revolution' of the mid-1990s – along with the exponential growth of English and regional TV channels –

transformed the media landscape in India. One of the consequences of the growing influence of mass media in Indian politics was how image – rather than ideology, party membership and political performance – took centre stage. It was not just a question of looking neat and presentable, wearing clean, heavily pressed *dhotis* and *kurtas*. Politicians increasingly hired image consultants, PR agencies, shopped at designers' boutiques, and even trained in gyms to look good (Times of India, 2004). It became acceptable for members of parliament to be leaders of fashion as well as of politics. From the late 1990s, politicians increasingly made bold fashion statements. These 'new-age' *netas* (politicians or leaders) – as they became known – had no qualms about shunning the old dress-code. Out went the white *khadi* and in came colourful, embroidered, rich clothes often from famous designers (Times of India, 2005, p. A5). Modi's sartorial choices must be framed within this changed context in which simplicity in clothing is of course still de rigueur in many regional settings or while campaigning, but also in which the mediatisation of politics has weakened the Gandhian-inspired dress-code of white *kurta-pyjama*.

However, unlike those politicians sporting designer clothes, Modi is keen to stress that his wardrobe is not the product of a fashion designer but only of his genius (Price, 2015; Mukhopadhyay, 2013). More than any other piece of clothing, Modi's favourite and most famous signature piece of clothing is the stiff, half-sleeve *kurta*, now widely known as the Modi *kurta*. In Modi's scripted performance of ordinariness, the story of the origins of these Modi *kurtas* plays an important role and is said to date back to his time in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). According to this anecdote (which spread during the 2014 election campaign), it was Modi himself who – when leading a simple life as a Hindu nationalist *pracharak* (peripatetic worker) – one day, decided to cut the long sleeves of his *kurtas*. In those days, he used to do all the household chores himself and the half-sleeved *kurtas*, Modi says, were much easier to wash and iron, and easier to pack. This anecdote suited his humble origin narrative and helped him establish the image of himself as the man of the people. Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Modi has also appeared in televised public appearances wearing a *gaamcha* – a thin, colourful cotton towel, a popular face covering used across rural India used to protect the wearer from the dust – as a face-cover instead of a proper N95 or surgical face mask (Chatterjee et al., 2021). By drawing from his life-story's cultural, social and economic resources, Modi's dress performances of ordinariness have projected an image of the BJP leader as a man of the people. The Modi *kurta* became an instant success (Times of India, 2014). During the 2014 elections, the hashtag #modikurta began trending on Twitter and on the website modimania.in (now defunct) one could purchase the 'famous funky Modi *kurtas*'. Brisk business was also recorded at Jade Blue, the shop owned by Modi's tailor. The

waistcoat often worn by Modi on top of his *kurtas* has also since become known as the Modi jacket, although this is none other than what was previously called the Nehru jacket (Gupta, 2015). Looking to strengthen his connection with the people, and following an unwritten electoral campaign tradition, Modi has also swapped his traditional *kurta-pyjama* uniform with local clothes and dabbled in *topi* politics wearing regional headgear in order to identify more closely with the local population. While Modi's presentation of himself as the embodiment of the people (rather than a representative of the people) has proved compelling, these practices also point to the exclusionary aspect of his wardrobe. His refusal to don a skull cap offered by an Imam at a public function in Gujarat in 2013 and his purported aversion to the green colour (commonly associated with Islam) (Mukhopadhyay, 2013) reflect an attempt at representing a Hindu India much more than a Muslim India.

The performance of difference – the leader as a norm-breaker and outsider

It is through deviation from 'appropriate political behaviour' and through 'performances disruptive of mainstream politics' (Moffitt, 2016, p. 58, 61) that the populist leader stands apart from 'corrupt' elites and sides with the people. The populist leader must therefore not only portray an image of him or herself as the man or woman of the people, but they must also be able to distinguish themselves from the 'enemies' of the people and to show themselves to be 'untainted by their association with the murky world of politics' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 7). Thus, beside the association with the people, what is also crucial for a populist leader is their performance of difference. Breaking dominant conventions of political correctness, acting in unexpected ways, deliberately lowering the level of public discourse and using politically incorrect terms or profanities are some ways in which populist leaders perform their closeness with the people and their distance from mainstream politics.

Modi's populism opposes the pure people not necessarily to socio-economic elites, but to India's *Westernised* elite: the English speaking, foreign educated, cosmopolitan, uprooted, and lately those who have been also defined as anti-national, and un-Indian. These elites are depicted as agents of foreign powers and ideas, ultimately alien, who favour the interest of the minorities at the expense of the deserving Hindu majority. Modi and his supporters use disparaging terms to refer to these elites (Dubey, 2021). Journalists are referred to as 'presstitutes', protesters labelled *andolanjivi* (career protester), intellectuals are called *urban naxals* (intellectual terrorists) and 'pseudosecular', and dissenters are said to be part of the *tukde tukde gang* (who want to break-up the country) (Kaul, 2021). Modi plays the anti-elitist card

assiduously. His personal life story not only testifies to his plebeian roots, but it is also useful to demonstrate his difference from the political elites and to certify his status as an outsider to Indian politics. Unlike many other politicians, Modi is not from a well-off political family, and he does not share cultural capital with India's old political guard. He did not attend prestigious education institutions, did not particularly excel in school and is not very comfortable in English (up to now, the unofficial language of the political and bureaucratic classes in Delhi). He is indeed a true plebeian (Jaffrelot, 2015a, p. 159).

To signal his difference from mainstream political elites, the Indian Prime Minister invokes his caste status from time to time, presenting himself as the politician from a disadvantaged background. He belongs to one of Gujarat's Other Backward Castes (OBC). For the BJP, caste origins are considered divisive identity traits and are often downplayed. But Modi has increasingly brought up his OBC identity to gain political advantage. The narrative of the personal journey of a small-town boy from one of the most disenfranchised sections of the population to prime minister obviously works well not just as a symbol of meritocracy (thus marking his distance from another 'other' – the undeserving poor who rely on the state positive discrimination system), but also as a statement against India's dominant dynastic politics. In effect, 'nothing works like a poor *chai-wallah* from a backward caste' (Dasgupta, 2014).

In his performances of difference from mainstream politics, unlike other populist leaders, Modi does not generally use offensive language or politically incorrect remarks. Since becoming prime minister in 2014, he has skilfully and regularly performed his difference by acting in ways that break with protocol and with the established ways of doing politics. In burnishing his anti-establishment credentials, he has openly flaunted his Hindu identity thus breaking the norm of Nehruvian secularism, that public displays of religious belonging and beliefs should be done with care. From taking a purifying dip in the Ganges in 2019, to presiding at the laying of the foundation stone for the Ram temple a year later in Ayodhya to meditating in a cave, to prostrating, in a dramatic gesture, to touching his forehead to the steps of Parliament on approaching the entrance – just like a Hindu devotee might do before entering a temple (Times of India, 2014) – these religiously coded performances are not just signalling distance from the privileged liberal elites but also speaking directly to a receptive Hindu audience.

Modi is also not afraid of shedding tears in public. He cries at least once a year (Ajaz, 2021).⁴ Public shows of emotions in politics are risky. Crying in public can be interpreted as sign of weakness and can be highly emasculating. But public outpouring of grief can also create an emotional bond with the audience. So, in his breaking with these established conventions of doing politics, his public tears have been seen as sincere, a touching

display of humanity rather than a political *faux pas* (BBC, 2014). Moreover, his crying in public has made Modi stand out among his peers, especially the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who was known for his expressionless delivery (Hindustan Times, 2014b).

These performances of difference are also rather sharply articulated through Modi's sartorial choices. Modi has adopted two distinct strategies to situate himself firmly as an outsider of elite politics. First, he has signalled his difference by distancing himself from other traditionally dressed politicians by experimenting with colour and fabrics. It is Modi's eclectic style, his 'divinely inspired'⁵ use of a bold colour-palette (beside a preference for saffron, the colour associated with Hinduism and *Hindutva*) for his ensembles, the varied choice of material, the regular change of dress, sometimes to suit the background, (Price, 2015, p. 238) that make him stand out as a norm-breaker, and an outsider in politics and ultimately an agent of change. Unlike other politicians dressed in often-crumpled off-white *khadi* – reminiscent of *swadeshi* asceticism (Vishwanathan, 2013, p. 54) – Modi's *kurtas* are colourful and always crisply ironed and well-fitted. It is worth noting that Modi's entry into national politics was not marked by conformism and attempts to blend in the dominant political culture, even in fashion. Modi's break with India's established sartorial traditions rather than being perceived as a sign of snobbery or inadequacy was noticed precisely because it broke with the sartorial convention of those who, while wearing 'their sloppy sartorial manners and ill-fitting dresses as badges of austerity' (Jobs, 2014) belonged in fact to a privileged, and as Modi would add, a corrupt elite. It has been noted that the political weakness of the opposition contributed to Modi's power of attraction since entering national politics in 2013. Even sartorially, it is evident that the Congress, India's oldest party, has been unable to resist Modi. There is nothing distinct about its leader Rahul Gandhi's often-crumpled white cotton *kurta-pyjamas*. His appearance in a torn kurta was poorly received (The Indian Express, 2017). What's more, Modi's unconventional sartorial statements make him stand out not only within Delhi's policy circles but also within his party – the BJP – and the wider Hindu nationalist movement. Modi's attention to clothing reveals an inclination towards the personalisation of power and image-building which clashes with the collegial ethos of the RSS and BJP, organisations both strongly averse to a cult of the leader.

The second strategy adopted by Modi to position himself as an outsider of mainstream politics and elites, is visible in his wardrobe choices when travelling abroad or meeting foreign dignitaries at home. On those occasions, the Indian Prime Minister has made a point to stay away from western suits – a common choice in those circumstances. In general, he sticks to indigenous clothing, often flaunting his eclectic style as a sign of national pride. For years, India's diplomats and high-ranking officers have worn a set suggested

by Nehru himself, made of tight *pyjama* trousers worn with the long (preferably hand-spun) *sherwani* jacket or the short, collarless Nehru jacket. *Bandhgala* (a structured, collared jacket) suits have also been very popular among prime ministers, presidents and ministries. Again, breaking with established political norms – Modi's choice of attire at high profile events has been more varied. He has worn both *bandhgala* jacket suits but also worn his trademark *kurta* uniform even when meeting important international guests – keeping, this way, his Indianness 'intact' (Desai, 2014).⁶ In his attention to indigenous fashion Modi then steps onto a well-trodden path according to which clothes need to convey a sense of Indianness without communicating a disdain for western civilisation à la Gandhi, for whom western clothes would make those wearing them look as 'a privileged, denationalised, and out-of-date class' (Tarlo, 1996, p. 123). Modi mixes national and international styles, in fact, he proudly wears his designer spectacles and his Montblanc pen. His choice of clothes exudes a sense of patriotic pride in this sartorial *swadeshi* style and by extension in the Indian nation, its culture and its civilisation.

Modi's sartorial choices are adventurous and there is a danger that his more elaborate performances may not work. His expensive western accessories have the potential to undermine his claims to ordinariness. Still, they have escaped public disapprobation, perhaps because they fit into a narrative of aspiration, achievement and due reward for hard work (as I argue below). However, when Modi wore a special navy-blue pinstripe *bandhgala* suit during Obama's 2015 visit to India with hand-stitched golden stripes that spelled out Modi's name in full, he opened himself up to mockery and the suggestion that he had joined the very elites he deprecated.⁷ In April 2015, the Congress Party's Vice-President Rahul Gandhi described Modi's government as '*a suit boot ki sarkar*' (Roy, 2015) – a government that, rather than taking care of the interests of the poor and the people in general, represents the interests of the powerful classes only – those wearing boots and (western) suits. The accusations were not baseless. As it was mentioned before, during his time as chief minister in Gujarat, Modi had set up a dense web of connections with certain powerful industrialists. There was a time when shabbiness was an acceptable approach to dressing. Journalist Shekhar Gupta (2015) recalls how former trade unionist, and member of the Rajya Sabha, George Fernandes crumpled his *kurta* before venturing out. Now, instead, it seems to be appropriate for the leader of an emerging superpower to dress smartly and esteem *swadeshi* especially if the country wants to portray itself as a rising global power and be taken seriously. Thus, Modi's sartorial choices, his meticulous even fastidious attention to personal appearance, his distinctive statements, strengthens his image as an outsider to the previous corrupt regimes and contributes to his performance of populism signalling his difference, honesty, integrity and patriotism and, most importantly, projecting him as an agent of change.

Performing extraordinariness

The previous sections showed how Modi presented himself both as a man of the people and as an outsider of the political establishment. However, populist performances embed a paradox when they celebrate ‘the ordinariness of its constituents and the extraordinariness of their leaders’ (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 6). The performance of ordinariness therefore can be accompanied by a performance of extraordinariness. Modi present himself as an extraordinary man ‘possessing outstanding leadership qualities’ (Moffitt, 2016, p. 57). Because populism claims to represent the truest, authentic and more deserving self of the nation that has been betrayed by the elites, populist leaders are not just the embodiment of the people, the expression of the popular will, and transgressive outsiders to the political establishment: they are also fighting heroes and the nation’s redemptive figures (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 76). Populist leaders are placed above the common people because of their power to bring salvation by virtue of their perceived extraordinary qualities. Modi’s rise has been predicated on a manufactured and an exaggerated myth of exceptional leadership. His performance of extraordinariness is articulated in various effective ways through the acclaim of his exceptional administrative skills, the representation of forceful masculinity and manly leadership style (Srivastava, 2015, p. 334), the exaltation of his extraordinary exploits, and, most recently, also by projecting an image of himself as a Hindu ascetic and the country’s self-proclaimed *chowkidar* (watchman).

Not long after the 2002 Gujarat riots Modi strived to reinvent himself as the investor-friendly CEO, chief minister of a progressive state and of an inclusive and development-oriented government (Jaffrelot, 2016). In a successful image makeover, Modi cast himself as the *vikas purush* (the development man), the honest, decisive, sincere and effective leader who will bring salvation to the Indian people. A narrative of the ‘Gujarat Model of Development’ – repeated like a mantra during the 2014 election campaign according to which the state of Gujarat and its citizens had flourished because of Modi’s effective and decisive governance and leadership style⁸ – sustained this image of a confident, efficient, strong leader at work. His public association with business elites further corroborated the projection of Modi as the pro-development super CEO (Pande, 2014). Since 2014 he has continued to project himself in similar terms, as a confident, strong and efficient prime minister.

Another way for Modi to represent extraordinariness has been his use of a calculated ‘manly’ leadership style to strengthen his image of a dynamic and powerful leader. Since his years in Gujarat, through the modulation of his voice, the use of a powerful rhetoric and his regular references to his 56-inch chest – ‘able and willing to bear the harshest burdens in the service of

Mother India' (Srivastava, 2015, p. 334) – he articulated a powerful discourse of masculinity. It was precisely through the employment of these images of virility that he has been able to strengthen his performance of the extraordinary saviour-leader, 'capable of overcoming the 'policy paralysis' that had putatively afflicted the previous regime' (Srivastava, 2015). Bold policy initiatives – such as the 2016 demonetisation when his government suddenly withdrew from circulation all 500 and 1,000 rupee notes to target counterfeit currency and undeclared wealth – contributed to this image of decisive leadership (Echeverri-Gent et al., 2021, pp. 420–422). Along with the promotion of the image of the humble tea seller and the super CEO, the projection of an almost ascetic-like lifestyle has sustained his presentation as a 'wise helmsman (...) motivated by a higher nobility of purpose and elevated personal ethics (...), a honourable man pursuing honourable goals through honourable means' (Khare, 2021). Modi is the teetotal, celibate, wandering *parivrajak* (ascetic) (Mukhopadhyay, 2012) who meditated in the Himalayas like the great Indian ascetics and who selflessly dedicated and sacrificed his life working for the benefit of the nation first, as a full-time volunteer of the RSS and now as the Prime Minister of India.

Pre-pandemic, the large rallies that Modi held regularly with the Indian diasporas abroad became plebiscitary acclamations of this image of the leader as saviour (de la Torre & La Torre, 2010, p. 200). But no where have Modi's attempt at reinforcing his image of the nation's self-proclaimed messiah been clearer and more emblematic as when he presided at the laying of the foundation stone of the controversial Ram temple in Ayodhya (August 2020) and of the new parliament building (February 2021). The two ceremonies were conducted almost exclusively according to Hindu rituals. Narrowing the gap between religion and politics, Modi, swathed in saffron clothes, acted as the official *yajmaan* (the patron of a Hindu religious ritual) offering prayers, chanting hymns and performing various religious rituals. Politicians have made public spectacle of their religiosity and have presided over religious ceremonies before, '[B]ut never before has a prime minister performed this kind of role' (Varadarajan, 2020). If representation as a proper devotee and sponsor of Hindu rituals were not enough to strengthen his messianic credential, the Prime Minister also infuses his rhetoric with tenets and symbolism of the Hindu tradition. He described the controversial 2016 demonetisation policy as a *yagna* (sacrifice) against corruption, terrorism and black money (Iqbal, 2016). When he harshly and suddenly imposed the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, the Prime Minister said that the '*tyaag* and *tapasya*' (renounce and sacrifice) of the hundreds of thousands of India's migrant workers who were left stranded will help India fight the pandemic (Punwani, 2020).

In his sartorial choices, Modi has strived to transmit these ideas of decisiveness, effectiveness and efficiency. He cultivates his pro-business, strong

leadership image by wearing tailored clothes. This uncluttered and sharp style became his uniform *de rigueur* during the 2014 campaign. Often changing as many as five times a day, during the campaign, in the blazing hot summer sun, he appeared in public always perfectly turned out, with a crisp, ironed, colour coordinated *kurta* and jacket, and tight-fitting *churidar*. His beard was always neatly trimmed, and his hair impeccably combed (even when emerging out of helicopters and on days of punishing campaigning). Through his clothes, he exuded a strong sense of power, professionalism and a business-like attitude. His designer glasses and the Montblanc pen visible in his breast pocket contributed to this image of a man at work. The crisply ironed clothes communicated an air of strength and determination. Although the expensive designer accessories do set Modi apart from the majority of the Indian masses, these objects are also seen to reflect the aspirations of the people, especially of the aspiring neo-middle classes (Jaffrelot, 2015a; Varshney, 2019). According to this interpretation, Modi's expensive fashion sense resonates with a section of the electorate that values opportunity and personal growth and progress. It is especially this aspirational power that is setting Modi apart from some other Indian leaders, such as West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who look for association with the poor through their sartorial choices. Narendra Modi's power-dressing is aspirational (Sikander, 2019), acting 'in ways that embody and live out the dreams of the common man' (Weyland, 2001 in Ostiguy, 2017, p. 90). The crisp, ready for business, expensive *kurtas* and various accessories, are all symbols, in this case, not of Modi's humble beginnings, but, most importantly, of his arrival. Through his sartorial style, it is as if Modi is saying: you too can make it!⁹

Modi's dress communicates an image of the powerful politician almost endowed with divine powers. Attempts at projecting an image of nationalist asceticism have become more frequent since 2019. The visit to the Kedarnath shrine in 2019 was recorded in widely circulated photographs and televised images showing him like a Hindu *sadhu* (ascetic). But it was the Covid-19 pandemic that provided the Indian Prime Minister with additional opportunities to refine this saintly look. Appropriating the religious imagery of the *rishiraj* – the holy man who is also king (Mukhopadhyay, 2021) – Modi appeared in public since the first lockdown in March 2020 with a flowing beard and shoulder-length white hair: a self-less Hindu guru devoted to the service of the nation (Chakraborty, 2019).

Conclusions

This article was moved by the perspective that that populism is something that is performed and enacted (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Accordingly, in this approach to the study of populist politics what matters is not necessarily

the content of the policies adopted, nor the type of political organisation and the mechanisms of communication used, not even the strategies of political mobilisation embraced. Rather, it is how content is performed that is important. Here I examined the performance of three key aspects of contemporary populism (identification with the people, anti-elitist discourse, and the presentation of the leader as saviour) by studying Modi's style and self-presentation. Through these analytical lenses the article revealed the extent of Modi's populist credentials. He embodied the archetypal common man by wearing the humble short-sleeve *kurta*, signalling his identification with the masses. His flashy and extravagant take on the traditional *neta* uniform of crumpled, off-white *kurta*-pyjama, projected an image of the leader as the outsider in politics – an icon of change – untarnished by the corrupt world of politics. And finally, Modi's calculated, sharp, uncluttered style and saintly look represented the BJP leader as the messianic, super CEO.

This article does not discount the significant role played for decades by the RSS and its formidable organisational structure in allowing the deep penetration of communal thinking and in enhancing the Indian Prime Minister's appeal at the polls, especially since the 2014 general elections (Chhibber & Osterman, 2014; Jha, 2017; Echeverri-Gent & Sadiq, 2020). Equally, it recognises that Modi's electoral success also depends on the public delivery of private welfare goods (gas cylinders, toilets, and bank accounts) (Thachil, 2014; Aiyar, 2019; Lamba & Subramanian, 2020).

Yet, leadership style is certainly important in building public support (Sircar, 2020). This study has shown how Modi's style of self-presentations 'tapped into clothing and clothing practice as semiotics' (Roces & Edwards, 2007, p. 5) and how his appreciation of the powerful persuasive communicative power of dress – capable of transcending linguistic and cultural limitations and of traversing class and caste boundaries – boost his influence and his exercise of power (Weyland, 2017, p. 55). More specifically, it has been argued that it is Modi's modulated performance of populism that has been critical to his political success. Political performances involve improvisations based on the calculation of what will be more effective, what will appear more authentic. Populist leaders have a keen eye on 'the people' even as they keep constructing the notion of a homogeneous people. Changes, shifts, even bold experiments are commonplace. By modulating his style of self-presentation Modi has been able to address different sectors of society and broaden the appeal of the BJP, eventually leading the party to an unprecedented victory in 2014 and to further gains in the 2019 general election. Data released by CSDS-Lokniti for the 2014 and 2019 elections confirms this. The Modi factor played a significant role. Modi was more popular than his party (Chhibber & Verma, 2014; Varshney, 2019). In 2019, the percentage of those who said they would not have voted for the BJP had Modi not been

the prime ministerial candidate rose from 32% in 2014 to 32 in 2019 (Varshney, 2019, 67).

By presenting himself as a man of the people, the Indian Prime Minister appeals to the Indian masses who share a similar background and life experience with him. As the low-caste, self-made man, and Delhi-outsider, he becomes attractive to younger voters and other Indians dissatisfied with ruling parties. And finally, as the saviour-leader – alternating between the image of the super CEO and the benevolent sage-king who is leading India back to greatness (Ali, 2020) – whilst crucially embodying the aspirations of the neo-middle classes (Jaffrelot, 2014), he also assuages the needs and desires of the more conservative, upper-castes, and upper-middle classes. This way, the BJP has been able to put together a social coalition that cut across caste and class, consolidating the support among its traditional supporters whilst also attracting a large number of voters from the semi-urban and rural constituencies and other communities such as the Scheduled Tribes and the poor. The party's vote shares has increased among all classes especially among the rural poor and all social categories, except Muslims. For Chhibber and Verma (2014), what really propelled the BJP to victory was therefore this historical consolidation of the Hindu votes with the unprecedented alliance of the upper castes, the OBCs, the Dalits and the tribals (Varshney, 2019, p. 66). The creation of this 'winning coalition' (Varshney, 2019, p. 66) is a reinvention of the Hindu nationalists' attempts at social engineering (Palshikar & Sure, 2015, p. 39) of the 1990s. Modi has made Hindu nationalism more plebeian, more popular (Jaffrelot, 2021). Through the rhetoric of dress, Narendra Modi's populist performances – by alternatively emphasising, through various polysemic sartorial choices, the virtuous people or the morally bankrupt elites and by projecting the Prime Minister as the saviour – have effectively become successful mechanisms for holding together disparate coalitions of odd political bedfellows (the upper castes, the Dalits, the middle-class and the aspiring middle classes) with different interests but common antipathies towards specific others (corrupt elites, the undeserving poor, and Muslims).

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Notes

1. Interview with party officials, BJP head quarters, New Delhi 2015.
2. It is worth nothing here that Modi is not the first Indian politician to present himself as a man of the people to the electorate. Even before the launch of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP – the Party of the common man) – Arvind Kejriwal (its leader) had built his reputation by projecting an image of himself as an ordinary citizen (Wyatt, 2015).
3. This visual aspect of political communication continued after 1947, with election symbols becoming part of the symbolic ensemble of the post-colonial state (Vittorini, 2014).
4. He cried when he delivered his first speech in Parliament in 2014, at the Q&A Town-Hall session with Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg in 2015 and at the farewell of Ghulam Nabi Azad, Rajya Sabha leader of the opposition in February 2021. In May 2021, Modi publicly cried again in a televised online interaction with healthcare workers in Varanasi at the height of the second Covid-19 surge. Facing harsh and growing criticism for his government handling of the crisis, this time his tears were seen as inauthentic and did not evoke sympathy (Menon, 2021).
5. 'God has gifted me the sense of mixing and matching colours. So I manage everything on my own. Since I'm God gifted I fit well in everything. I have no fashion designer but I'm happy to hear that I dress well.' (Modi quoted in Price, 2015, p. 239)
6. For instance, he wore a white *kurta-pyjama* with a maroon jacket when he met Queen Elizabeth II during his 2015 visit to the UK.
7. A few weeks later, the monogrammed suit was sold at an auction for nearly £450,000 with the promise to devote the money raised to the campaign to clean the river Ganges. (Saiyed & Kateshiya, 2015).
8. Despite witnessing a consistent average of 10% growth across several sectors between 2004 and 2012 when Narendra Modi was in power in the state, this was a growth with little improvement in human development indicators (Jaffrelot, 2015a).
9. The comparison with Mamata Banerjee was laid out during a personal conversation with officials at the BJP headquarters in Delhi: 'Modi does not talk people down. Rather, he bigs them up. He tells them: you too can aspire to better things in life; and like me, you can make it.' – April 2014

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