The Two Families of Modi

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ABSTRACT

The gradual rise of right-wing populism in India has, for the time being, dominated the conversation about Indian politics. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has served as the protagonist of this political genre. The role of his personal experiences, particularly during the years he spent in the Hindu nationalist organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), in the formation of his populist politics has been well-studied. What researchers have not yet focused on is Modi's rhetoric on the family and the role it plays in his populist mobilization. This commentary aims to address these issues through a discourse analysis of Modi's invocation of family in his politics. I will address the dialectics of family vis-a-vis political rhetoric and compare Modi's discourses of "Indian-diaspora-as-extended-family" and estrangement from his own family—both of which are present in his rhetoric on family and politics as well as family-in-politics. I argue that Modi's two-faced discourses on family, however contrasting, play a central role in his populist mobilization.

Keywords: family, populism, Modi, India

Introduction

The role of the family as a sociological unit in understanding politics is a staple in the social sciences. This commentary aims to use the lens of family as a central point in analyzing contemporary Indian politics and its implications on the family as a social unit in India. To do this, I will focus on India Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rhetoric on family and analyze the forms and contexts in which he invokes the family narrative in his political rhetoric and situate it in his own biography. This two-fold approach is crucial in understanding that Modi's rhetoric as not simply political messaging, but also as a function of the dynamic nature of family. This commentary takes inspiration from Bourdieu's concept of habitus and how it can weave together Modi's rhetoric on family and his own familial experience (Bourdieu 2010). Overall, I argue that Modi's two-faced discourses on family, however contrasting, plays a central role in his populist mobilization.

Political Families and Families in Politics

The Gandhi family is among the most prominent Indian political families and a frequent subject of caricatures and criticisms by Modi and his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 2011, widespread protests over the alleged government corruption by the Gandhi family grew into a larger movement which eventually led to Modi's ascent to power in 2014.

The 2011 movement was a pan-Indian middle class opposition against corruption in the United Progressive Alliance II (UPA II)-led government, of which the Gandhi-dominated Indian National Congress (INC) is the largest party-member. From 2009 to 2011, the Gandhi family was at the center of political instability in India following the exposé of a plethora of government scams (Arun 2011). In those years, the scams were blamed on the ills of family rule in India. The rule of the Gandhi Family, which implies the Prime Ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, and the subsequent control of INC's leadership between Sonia

Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, were also frequently referenced using the imagery of a doomed India under the reigns of one political family (Anuja 2019). Political succession within the Gandhi family in contemporary India was also constantly compared with the dynastic rule of Mughals in the 16th to 19th century.[1] This comparison became a common theme during the years of protests and it has also been used by Modi in his own rhetoric. For instance, while some (the Gandhi family) see legacy only through their family name (Times of India 2020), Modi thinks that it should be part of the country's heritage. He claims, in a speech in February 2014: "*Mere liye na koi aagey, na peechhey. Kiske liye bhrashtachaar karunga?*" (I have no family ties. I am single. Who will I be corrupt for?) (Bhatt 2014).

Modi's rhetoric frames family as the representation of illegitimacy, corruption, and poor governance in India. It is not simply a political message against the Gandhi family but a rejection of the kind of familial, if not dynastic, politics they supposedly represent. The desire for corruption, as his rhetoric implies, stems not from systemic issues but from the kinship that family develops. For Modi, desire becomes a function of a collective called the family and this desire is inherently antithetical to other collectives. In this discourse, the democratic nation is imagined to be the anti-thesis of a nation under one family rule. In deploying this discourse, Modi creates the space for a masculine figure who can reform the nation's politics (Kinnvall 2019). It creates another idealized form of family in which the masculine figure assumes an ascetic and distanced role so that material desires do not conflict with other virtues of life. Modi situates himself as an individual without desires but a virtuous man who does not bow down to the demands of family norms and kinship politics, which he assigns to the Gandhi family.

Despite discursively rejecting Gandhi-led kinship rule, there are no signs that Modi and the BJP are willing to completely turn away from the role of political families in politics. Although he portrayed that the Gandhi family and their rule as solely responsible for many of India's current issues, he has also made new allies among the political families who were once influential in the INC. The Scindia family's decision to join BJP after

being one of the pillars of INC represents the most recent power shift and can easily be interpreted in rational-utilitarian terms. Influential families, like the Scindia, are changing allegiances because of the shifting political fortunes of the INC and the BJP. However, the next sections will show how and why understanding Modi's experience with his own family may also contribute to an alternative understanding of such political developments.

Modi and his family: Estranged for the greater good



Figure 1. "The Other Modis" (Mahurkar 2017).

Modi's official personal website[2] mentions him as the third child of Damodardas Modi and Hiraba Modi and that he comes from a family of humble origins and modest means (Narendra Modi Website 2014; PM India n.d.). However, it does not mention any other member of his immediate or extended family. His website also makes no reference to his family other than an uploaded photo of him and his mother. Upon examination of how Modi tells the story of his family, three elements emerge: (1) his birth into a poor family in Gujarat into an Other Backward Class (OBC),[3] (2) his primary relation to his family through only his mother, and (3) the absence from any morphology of family.

Christophe Jaffrelot (2021) writes, and which could be a reason for the omission, that Modi tactically develops the idea of what Weber calls a charismatic authority[4] through "guruhood," *fakiri*,[5] or what Morris Jones calls "saintly politics" (Srinivasan 2014, xv). "Saintly politics" has a long heritage in Asia (See Gopabandhu Das of India in Dash 1977; Srinivasan 2014, xv). The estrangement from family demands valorization seeking to make it legitimate in the eyes of the people. The website effectuates this legitimacy as it generously and redundantly emphasizes the vision that Modi had as a child, the desire to change the world, the journey to the Himalayas, and the struggle to become a leader. The cost of this valorization is the obscurity of Modi in his own family which reveals a narrative of the structure of family and politics where the family becomes a mere containment that must be overcome, a threshold which needs escaping. Modi is symptomatic of a political view that claims that a family man cannot be a political man. The same view is demonstrated in the lives of other prominent leaders like Gandhi and Gopabandhu Das. Weber (2015 [1946]), for instance, talks of the political man as the economic man and directly associates this with a lack of affect that is typically associated with the family.

Modi further narrates his lack of attachment with his family in an infamous interview: "If I had left my home after becoming Prime Minister then I could have missed my family. But I left my home at a very young age and was never very attached to my family" (Asia News International 2019). Modi uses his election as Prime Minister as a pivotal point to inform the Indian public of his supposed "familyless-ness." In the succeeding sentence, he shifts the timeline back to his childhood showing the malleability of family as a structure that the political man can, on his will and at any time, locate as an institution that has no concrete situatedness. It indicates the becoming of family as a metaphysical entity which is devoid of the social relationships and the material and non-material conditions which characterize it. In such a form of narrative, family becomes a genre of fiction.

For Modi, the family also exemplified bondage while the Hindi nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) provided belonging. Mukhopadhyay (2013, 98) states in Modi's biography that "[RSS] gave him a sense of belonging during his childhood and again after he chose to break free from the physical bondage of home and family." The gendered discourse here is unmistakable. RSS, where Modi supposedly found a sense of belonging, is a predominantly male fascist organization that symbolizes toxic forms of masculinity and violence (Kinnvall 2019; Pal 2020). In comparison, Modi found bondage in family even without ever being in that bondage as he claims that he left the family at an early age. In fact, it is his wife Jashodaben who appears to be living in the bondage for which the family has become a place of atrophy. In 2009, she reportedly "earns a monthly salary of Rs 10,000 [USD 125.00], lives in a one-room tenement in the Panchalvas area in the village and pays a rent of Rs 150.00 [USD 1.80] every month. The 100 square foot room has a tin roof, no toilets, and not even a bathroom" (Deshpande 2009). What exists is family as an object that serves to valorize Modi's struggle from family whom, in his own words, he never interacted or lived with.



Figure 2. Jashodaben (Desphande 2009).

To understand Modi politically, a central point of departure is the discourse of family. Modi's estrangement from his family is one of the dominant narratives but his portrayal of the Indian diaspora collective as his extended family is another related narrative. The next section of this essay seeks to unpack this .

Modi and the Indian Diaspora: The world as his extended family



Figure 3. Modi in Madison Square Garden (Bhattacharya 2014).

In Howdy Modi, an event in Houston in 2020, Modi addressed the Indian diaspora as his extended family. This has been a constant reference in his addresses overseas including the ones delivered in the Madison Square Garden in 2014 and Westminster in 2018. Scholars have observed that the grandeur of addressing the imagined extended family—the Indian diaspora—is vibrant and widely addressed the contrast with the implicit affects of estrangement in Modi's narrative of his own family (Jaffrelot 2016; Rao 2018). This symbolism allows Modi to transform himself into an enigmatic figure. This also helped reverse his image from one of the most

divisive voices in Indian politics into India's strongest leader after Indira Gandhi. In this symbolism, I locate the second aspect of family for Modi. The diaspora serves as both a metaphysical and a substantive family which Modi cannot transfigure on his own will but can allow transfiguration from within the group by attributing to them virtues of a family. It becomes a key figure for Modi by transforming the diaspora to becoming his "family" where he invokes belonging or social relations.

Singh (2017) pointed out that "Modi has left no stone unturned to heap praise on the Indian diaspora. He sees them as ideal migrants in their host nations, investing sweat and blood to develop those countries." Modi himself recently spoke and stated that "The Indians living abroad are not only the success story of India but also the brand ambassadors of our success" (PTI 2022). In this representation of family, one may notice the embodied elements of family—blood and sweat. This family is endowed with an agency which works in creating value, participating in labor, and as ideal members. This is in contrast with the "obscure" or the "obscurity" with which Modi reflects on his own family. Similarly, Paul (2019) describes the Howdy Modi gathering in Houston: "They'd adorned their bodies in the name of both ancestry and functionality. The spectrum of colors that spanned their saris and kurtas was an homage to their homeland, while others wore jackets despite Houston's humidity." Moving away from corporeality, the family now receives its colors and history in the form of cultural symbols. Blood and sweat are not aspects of the decaying body in the family that is in some bondage. On the contrary, the body is adored. Unlike Modi's own family, the diasporic family does not require valorization but demands explication.

Conclusion

What, then, does Modi's political rhetoric on family tell us about family and politics as well as family in politics? Both of Modi's two discourses on family creates fragmented emotional sensibilities useful for populist political mobilization. On the one hand, the discourse of family as a bondage to escape connects with the largely displaced populations, which has increased

now more than ever, and among those trapped in generational poverty in poorer states (Jaffrelot 2016). In this discourse, Modi and his rags-to-riches story represents an idealized narrative of family as a threshold to overcome, but which he alone overcame. He is, so to speak, a first among equals in the political world without the baggage of family and the corrupting demands and desires of kinship.

On the other hand, the other discourse of "diaspora-as-extended-family" is used to evoke the close connection to the land among Indians who have physically left the state. Its affective dimension is meant to create an exalted state of association with the Indian state among the diaspora community through the image of a large family working towards shared goals. This stands in contrast to Modi's within-nation family rhetoric which dismisses the family as having no utility in state-building. The family in this discourse is to be celebrated, and creatively exploited for its symbolic value, to mobilize support among Indian diaspora. Modi's two-faced discourses on family, however contrasting, still prove strategic for his populist aims.

When compared with other populist leaders' rhetoric on family and politics (See examples: Emery, Meier, and Mortelmans 2018; Orenstein and Bugarič 202; Yilmaz 2015), Modi's appear to be refreshingly different. In the Philippines, populist Rodrigo Duterte is considered a symbolic father of the nation and this serves as a discursive cover and supposed moral basis of his violent approach to disciplining the children-like members-of-nation (Arguelles and Gregorio 2020). On the contrary, Modi's rhetoric represents family life as without moral or national purpose (and tied to parochial and selfish ends). In the case of Recep Erdogan of Turkey, conservative rhetoric on family is used to legitimize public policy promoting conservative forms of family and policing other forms (Yilmaz 2015). However, as demonstrated in the previous sections, Modi's story of his estrangement from his family is a more subliminal and implicit form of re-imaging the family in the public imagination. Furthermore, his rhetoric is not coupled with an active policing of what family should be. It focuses on family and politics as well as family-in-politics, emphasizing what evils the family can cause in politics without necessarily offering prescriptions on what forms it should take.

Populist rhetoric on family is an expansive field that needs more rigorous mining among scholars. There is much to be learned on how the discourse of family is put to use for populist mobilizational aims in India and elsewhere in Asia. I am convinced that understanding how the family becomes a central aspect of populist mobilization is a task that social scientists must undertake more seriously and urgently.

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Sandeepan is currently a Ph.D. Candidate at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. Previously, he finished his MSc in Sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He also held a scholarship at the Karl Jaspers Center for Advanced Transcultural Studies at the Ruprecht Karl University of Heidelberg.

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Endnotes

[1] Colloquially, this comparison implied that the Gandhi family, like the Mughals, was involved in looting the nation and the transmission of power was based on family, instead of an elected ruler.

[2] Narendra Modi has his own official website that is managed by the Prime Minister Office: https://www.narendramodi.in/.

[3] Other Backward Class or OBC is a classification category used by Government of India to identify socially and economically backward communities.

[4] For Weber, any authority that emanates from the personality of a person, a leader, or a key figure, is charismatic authority.

[5] *Fakiri* is a term colloquially used to refer to a sense of ascetic life and non-materialistic outlook of world.

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