

## Humour from the Right: Authoritarian Populism and Punch-Down Laughter in India

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This paper examines India's authoritarian populist politics through a study of humorous speeches made by the nation's prime minister, Narendra Modi, known for his Hindu supremacist right-wing stance. It qualitatively analyses Modi's strategic use of humour that targets marginalised groups, including intellectuals, women, people with disabilities, and the Muslim community. The act of suicide and the state of widowhood have also been targets. By employing textual analysis of specific jokes and insults delivered by Modi in public forums, the study demonstrates how carnivalesque speech is used to 'punch down' on individuals and groups based on their identity. The paper draws a comparison with Donald Trump's use of similar humour, noting how both leaders utilise it to destabilise their opposition and mock minorities. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory as a lens, which originally posits a democratic and inclusive potential to subvert power, the study argues that the 'inverted carnival' employed by leaders like Modi and Trump serves to consolidate power and undermine minority rights. This research introduces the concept of 'inverted carnival' as a new framework for analysing the use of humour in authoritarian populist governance globally.

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## Introduction

India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, has tweeted about the need for more satire and humour in public life emphasising their power to bring happiness and healing. In January 2017, he tweeted from his @PMOIndia handle: 'I think we need more satire and humour. Humour brings happiness in our lives. Humour is the best healer: PM @narendramodi' (PMO India, 2017). Again in March the same year, he tweeted from his @narendramodi handle: 'We surely need more humour in public life' (Modi, 2017).

He is clearly in favour of humour having tweeted about it twice: once from his official prime ministerial account and again from his personal account. Humour, he contends, has uplifting and restorative powers, stressing its importance in public life. Humour does indeed have many powers. However, while it can bring happiness and healing, it can also do the opposite. Modi highlighted humour's beneficial powers, but it also has damaging powers. In politics, humour has been used to mock opposition and minority groups, shape public opinion, and influence electoral outcomes. Modi is no stranger to telling jokes. At public events and electoral rallies, he has called his political rivals names, and has targeted scholarly figures, women, disabled people, and Muslims. Though not known to make self-deprecatory jokes often or effectively whilst addressing audiences in India, he has used self-mockery during his visit to the US, and delightful rhetoric to entertain his audience in Australia. The question then arises: as the leader of the world's most populous democracy commanding considerable global recognition, how is Modi putting humour to use, and to what political effect?

Modi's political style has been described as authoritarian populist (Rachman, 2021; Sinha, 2021; Sud, 2020). Authoritarian populism is being increasingly understood as the widespread international trend towards illiberalism: a kind of politics rooted in setting one group of people against another by a leadership that represents itself as the voice of the 'common people' in a struggle against 'the elite' and minority groups (Moffitt, 2020; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). The leader is represented as a 'strongman' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Rai, 2024) possessing a cult-like personality (Rachman, 2021; Sundar, 2023) embodying the will of the common people (Müller, 2016). This trend has degraded democratic discourse, fuelled nationalism, and obscured the lines between truth and fiction (Maxwell, 2024). The 45<sup>th</sup> president of the USA, Donald Trump—also described as an authoritarian populist (Kellner, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Rachman, 2021)—used mocking humour as a political weapon to destabilise his opponents and wear down democracy while revelling in it (Gaufman and Ganesh, 2024; Goldstein, Hall and Ingram, 2020). Furthermore, he is known for his disregard of minority rights, and ridicule of women and immigrants, and has been

accused of mocking a disabled reporter. Notwithstanding their vastly different cultural contexts, both Trump and Modi seem to play a curious carnival game of strongman mockery aimed at belittling minority groups and the so-called establishment, while engendering and maintaining popular electoral support. The historical origins of Modi's party, the Bharatiya Janata Party [Hindi: Indian People's Party; BJP henceforth] in the 1920s, have been linked to ideological sympathies that lay with European fascism (Bhagavan, 2008). In the present times, the BJP and its leadership are widely recognised for their right-wing politics (Banaji, 2018; Chacko, 2018; Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot, 2019; Roy Chowdhury and Keane, 2021).

Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) conceptualised carnival as a popular festive form symbolising the inverting of accepted social order. Within his carnival framework, laughter is a form of resistance to power that engenders a sense of subversion from below (Bakhtin, 1984a, 1984b; Kershner, 2011). Though this theory has its critics, as we see below, Bakhtin's carnival model has been commended for its democratic ethic and its potential to open up spaces that challenge hierarchies (Clark and Holquist, 1984; Hirschkop and Shepherd, 1989; Renfrew, 2015). Scholars (Bandlamudi and Ramakrishnan, 2018) have also studied his work in the context of India, drawing connections between his concepts and the ancient philosophical traditions of the land. This study examines aspects of 'punch-down' humour in Modi's speeches through Bakhtin's carnival model. In doing so, it seeks to understand the objective behind Modi's humour that targets disability, mental health, suicide, intellectualism, women, widowhood, and the Indian National Congress Party (Congress, henceforth) in the context of his tweets. The paper analyses how humour is wielded by India's populist leadership from their own position of power as they seemingly punch *up* at 'establishment' represented by the Nehru-Gandhi dynastic members of the Congress. While in Bakhtin's model, the common 'folk' were allowed carnival as an event where they could mock authority figures—or punch up at those higher up in the hierarchy—in the contexts of Modi and Trump, both powerful individuals, humour is used to punch *down*. As populist politicians, these leaders have *avowedly* positioned themselves as outsiders located on the margins, from where they *appear* to be punching *up* at the establishment consequently shaping public opinion, and arguably, influencing electoral outcomes. This paper argues that this kind of carnivalesque use is essentially a co-option of Bakhtin's carnival vision for undemocratic gains. It is an inversion of the Bakhtinian carnival inversion, thus bringing one back to the status quo. Instead of punching up to subvert from below, this form of carnivalesque punches down to reinforce hierarchies. This co-opted model of carnival inversion is a novel framework that may be useful in studies of punch-down humour used by politicians around the world.

## The Theory of Carnival

In *Rabelais and His World* (1984b), Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualised carnival as a popular festive form symbolising the inverting of accepted social order. His theory of carnival posits that a sense of equality and democracy was achieved during the period of festivity preceding Lent in the otherwise hierarchical Catholic societies of medieval Europe (Parkin and Davis, 2014). The Catholic Church supported revelry, festivities, and excess, leading up to the ritual of penitence by sending missionaries to communities to sanctify the upending of rules and inverting of hierarchies. This period is symbolised by folk laughter, when officialdom and societal conventions that held sway at other times, were parodied, and hierarchies inverted (Stoeltje, 2014). ‘It was precisely the one-sided character of official seriousness which led to the necessity of creating a vent for the second nature of man, for laughter,’ wrote Bakhtin (1984b: 75). He envisioned carnival as democratic: ‘a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism’ (1984b: 37). Even though it is a church-sanctioned celebration of overturning of accepted hierarchies, it symbolises an ‘anti-ideology and anti-hierarchy (democratic) constellation’ (Gaufman, 2018: 414). During carnival life, as Bakhtin writes, ‘the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the “feast of fools,” and in the churches directly under the pope’s jurisdiction a mock pontiff was even chosen’ (1984b: 81). He developed this framework further in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* wherein he theorised that the official, the decorous, and the authority of ‘hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property)’ (1984a: 123)—all arranged structures of ‘noncarnival life’—are retracted during carnival life when the upside-down carnival milieu allows for the voices of the otherwise silenced to be heard.

Bakhtin’s carnival model has its critics. Eagleton (1981, 2019), Stallybrass and White (1986), Cullingford (1994), Stevens (2007) and other scholars have emphasised the limitations of this theory, rightfully drawing attention to Bakhtin’s idealising of the popular festive form as a utopian inversion of all official and social hierarchies while discounting carnival’s potential for violence. Renowned literary critic Terry Eagleton contends that the ‘sponsored’ nature of humour—as in the church-sanctioned medieval carnival—is essentially ‘corporatist’ (1981: 149) in scope. Though carnival offers a ‘safety valve’ for ‘subversive energies’ (Eagleton, 2019: 162), it offers no revolutionary potential as such. Stallybrass and White underscore the ‘uncritical populism’ of carnival whereby it ‘violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’’ (1986: 19). Cullingford (1994) agrees with Stallybrass and White’s view drawing parallels to the sexual politics of festivity—wherein the female body is imagined on top in the inverted

festive world—further marginalising women. Stevens criticises Bakhtin’s ‘tendency to absolutize the liberating potential of carnival and [for insisting] that the reversal of social, ethical and behavioural norms is necessarily comic’ (2007: 1).

These criticisms are crucial. However, Bakhtin’s model too cannot be deemed as superfluous. For as a social expression, Bakhtin’s carnival—a free-flowing occasion with the ‘folk’ celebrating in the public square—offers opportunities of new relationships to be formed and voices of the normally unheard to be heard, in an otherwise strictly hierarchical society. In the Foreword of *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin scholar Krystyna Pomorska (1984: x) writes:

The “authoritarian word” does not allow any other type of speech to approach and interfere with it. Devoid of any zones of cooperation with other types of words, the “authoritarian word” thus excludes dialogue. Similarly, any official culture that considers itself the only respectable model dismisses all other cultural strata as invalid or harmful.

Pomorska’s account precisely anticipates India’s political discourse that champions the singular authoritarian word of the BJP, excludes dialogue, disregards opposition, disparages dissent, and marginalises minority voices. Studies of authoritarian populism in India have demonstrated how despite the broadly pluralistic and democratic fabric of the nation, the words and actions of Modi and the BJP are authoritarian and targeted at centralisation of powers.

### **Authoritarian Populism in India**

The rise of authoritarian populism in many countries around the world is being increasingly discussed in scholarly studies and media commentary (Bugaric, 2019; Chacko, 2018; Kellner, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Ockey and Talib, 2023; Rachman, 2021; Rogenhofer and Panievsky, 2020). The ideologies embraced by present-day authoritarian populist leaders overlap with that of the fascist leaders who rose to prominence in Europe in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Rabinowitz, 2023). Like fascism, populism too is opposed to pluralism, political liberalism, and democratic principles. One important point of similarity is the need for both fascist and populist leaders to have to ‘accommodate’ liberalism for political expediency in the shorter run for the gain of greater authoritarian control for extensive periods of time. Modern-day authoritarianism is predicated upon the use of democratic principles for undemocratic gains (Chacko, 2018; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Rachman, 2021). Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who is considered an authoritarian populist

leader, has famously said: ‘Democracy is like a tram that you ride, until you get to your destination’ (Rachman, 2021: 13). In India, for example, Hindu supremacist ideology—also known as Hindutva—was at the forefront of Modi’s 2019 re-election campaign (Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot, 2019). Following victory, minority communities have been increasingly slighted and their human rights unheeded (Gudavarthy, 2022; Tharamangalam, 2016). Anti-minority rhetoric has amplified (Banaji and Bhat, 2022); threats, intimidation, and violence are now an increasing part of Hindu religious marches and in the display of theism. In an anti-democratic manoeuvre, the BJP introduced a bill in the parliament in 2023 designed to curb the independence of India’s election commission (Jain, 2023) as federalism declines and power centralising tendencies increase (Jaffrelot, 2023). About India’s Supreme Court, Sundar writes:

*[T]he last decade is strongly marked by two features: first, an unwillingness to hear major constitutional issues that might challenge the regime; and second, judgments that serve as an advertorial for the regime, reinforcing an antiminority ideological orientation, justifying the government’s actions, and promoting Modi’s personality cult (2023: 106) (emphasis in original).*

Modi’s public image is presented as common and uncommon at once (Vittorini, 2022). Through strategic use of fashion, dress, and headgear he is produced as a larger-than-life figure while also the common people’s leader. His party produces and reproduces him as a heroic personality worthy of veneration. Through highly mediatised speeches, rallies, and events that appeal to popular and religious imagination, Modi has managed to ‘divine the proper will of the people’ (Müller, 2016: 29). During his 2024 campaign, he proclaimed his alignment with divinity. He is quoted in a media report (Dhillon, 2024) thus:

I am convinced that ‘*Parmatma*’ (God) sent me for a purpose. Once the purpose is achieved, my work will be one done. This is why I have completely dedicated myself to God[.] He does not reveal his cards, just keeps making me do things. And I cannot dial him directly to ask what’s next.

While he has disclosed his ‘direct’ links with the Almighty, he has also removed himself from accountability: he is *made* to do things by God, yet he cannot ask anything of God. In his political speeches, he tells jokes that punch down upon his political opponents (Ruparelia, 2019; Sinha, 2017) as well as imaginary figures (Kamra, 2023; PTI, 2023) who embody values antithetical to his own. His claim of direct divine connectivity places in relief the contradiction that his jokes and insults embody. A godly person is unlikely to punch down.

As a ‘strongman’ (Rachman, 2021), Modi uses his high-level oratorical skills addressing people directly at political rallies attended by hundreds of thousands and via India’s public broadcasting systems (Sinha, 2021) presenting himself as the voice of the common people: a feature of populist leadership. While he has used punch-down humour targeting minority groups in his speeches in India, at his diplomatic visit to the US in 2023, he used humour to self-deprecate his inability to sing at the state dinner hosted in his honour by President Joe Biden at the White House (Bose and Zengerle, 2023). He referenced popular cultural figures and institutions such as Spiderman, Halloween, and Bollywood to highlight India-US ties at the event where important figures of the Indian diaspora were also present (Superville and Hussein, 2023). In a speech delivered at a stadium in Sydney attended by over 21,000 people of the Indian diaspora as well as Australia’s important political figures including Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Modi used delightful alliteration to underscore India-Australia ties citing ‘Commonwealth, cricket and curry’, ‘democracy, diaspora and *dosti* (Hindi: friendship)’, and ‘energy, economy and education’ (ET Online, 2023; Rachwani, 2023). Rhetoric, jokes, and self-deprecatory humour have earned him significant visibility and appeal on the international stage, particularly among the Indian diasporas.

Though electoral success is dependent upon many factors, BJP’s ubiquity in the public sphere through high-level management and control of the media plays an important role in the party’s electoral success (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2020; Parthasarathi and Srinivas, 2019). Modi appears regularly on India’s public broadcasting channels speaking to India’s people (Sharma and Dubey, 2021; Sinha, 2021) and has an active X (formerly Twitter) handle. However, his ‘Twitter is uncharacteristically silent about any aspect of human and minority rights’ (Rao, 2018: 176), and he has never directly answered questions from the press in an open press conference in India (Chaturvedi, 2018; Tewari and Kaushika, 2019) since assuming the prime minister’s office. For populists, this seemingly ‘direct connection’ (Müller, 2016: 35) with people enables them to sidestep intermediaries such as journalists who may ask ‘difficult’ questions. The BJP apparatus, however, continues to influence the public sphere through Hindu-centric rhetoric, misogyny, and hate speech (Chakravartty and Roy, 2015; Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2020; Mitra, 2021; Pande, 2022; Udupa, 2018). Political actors ‘specialize[d] in the use of identity politics [...] mobilize people around a constructed enemy’ (George, 2017: 162), which in India’s case includes the ‘establishment’ and minority communities, particularly the Muslim community. Facebook has been used to incite violence against these minorities, leading to riots and deaths (Banaji and Bhat, 2022). Traditional news media channels under BJP control to various degrees have anchors ‘fixated on promoting religious majoritarianism, defending the policies of the Modi

government, and advocating hyper-nationalism [that] stifle dissenting voices and forestall free expression' (Bhat and Chadha, 2023: 244).

India's 'saffronisation'—a neologism based upon the saffron-coloured robes of Hindu ascetics and priests—is linked to the BJP's attempt under current leadership to homogenise India's diverse population into a 'harmonised' whole, united under the banner of Hindutva (Ruparelia, 2019). Hinduism and Hindutva are not the same.

Hinduism is the name given to the most ancient and persistent religion on the Indian subcontinent, and Hindutva is the name by which the ideology of the Hindu right, represented by the [BJP], is known (Sharma, 2020: 43).

Hinduism is a religion. Hindutva is 'Hindu cultural nationalism' (Ruparelia, 2019: 94). To Hindutva followers, the religions that *originated* in India, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism, have legitimacy. Islam and Christianity are considered foreign. '[An] exclusionary form of identity politics', this us-versus-them divide is a feature of populism where populist actors portray themselves—the 'us'—as 'distinctly moral' (Müller, 2016: 38) as opposed to the 'other' who are not. With BJP's ascendance, Hindutva ideology has found increasing dominance. The Muslim population primarily has been labelled 'the other'. In 2019, following protests upon the passing of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act that legitimises discrimination based on religion (Amnesty International, 2024), police were deployed to assault students of Jamia Milia and Aligarh Muslim Universities (Jaffrelot, 2021). In February to March 2020, Muslim people were lynched on the streets and their homes torched during riots in Delhi (Biswas, 2020; Yasir and Perrigo, 2020). Surveys indicate the growing unwillingness of Hindus to have Muslim neighbours (Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot, 2019). Soon after its 2019 electoral victory, the BJP swiftly and effectively legislated the annexation of India's only Muslim-majority autonomous state of Jammu and Kashmir (Appadurai, 2021). Domestic practices, such as diet, relationships, marriage, and divorce are being increasingly controlled (Strohl, 2019; Sur, 2018; Tyagi and Sen, 2020).

BJP's dominant Hindutva vision and authoritarian control of dissent have led to the persecution of stand-up comedians who satirise Modi, his party, and Hindu deities. Though many comedians have faced persecution in the form of online threats, abuse, and direct state action (Chilana and Bhargava, 2024), notable among them are Vir Das, Kunal Kamra, and Munawar Faruqi. Das faced online backlash and potential state action as multiple police complaints were filed against him following the publication of his spoken word poem, 'I come from two Indias' on YouTube (BBC, 2021) which he recited at the conclusion of his comedy performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. In the poem he contrasted the secular and democratic tenets of the nation's constitution with



the discriminatory political and social practices embedded in India's cultural fabric. As a satirist, Das was no stranger to online harassment. However, given the 'international' stage upon which he read his poem—and thereby its potential for wider appeal, particularly among the Indian diaspora—the backlash in India was swift and intense. Though charges against Das were eventually dropped, Kamra has faced a series of litigations for satirising Modi and his party, and Faruqui, a Muslim man, was arrested and jailed for jokes that he apparently did not make (BBC, 2022; Nevatia, 2023; Singh, 2024).

In the following section, I present a qualitative analysis of Modi's humorous speeches and insults to demonstrate how the authoritarian word is disseminated in India. I present the analysis through the theory of carnival arguing that such carnivalesque speech is a co-option of Bakhtin's democratic model for gain and maintenance of popular electoral support in ways that are in contradiction to his inclusive ethical vision.

## Method

The speeches of Modi involving punch-down humour presented here are primarily sourced from online news media. In the absence of in-depth scholarly studies about the events related to such speech, and more importantly, the speeches themselves, I have relied on journalistic reports published in established Indian and international media sourced through library databases and Google. Main keywords used are India, Modi, Gujarat, speech, humour, humor, mock, ridicule, joke, insult, minority, US, Trump, Muslim, Pakistan, Musharraf, disability, suicide, Congress, Gandhi, and Nehru. Emphasis has been placed upon identifying speeches that mock figures—both real and imaginary—who are in positions less powerful than Modi's. A feature of populism is the construction of an 'other' that includes the 'corrupt' elite and minority groups against whom the 'common' people is set in opposition. In India's case, the 'corrupt' elite is BJP's primary opposition party, the Congress and its Nehru-Gandhi dynastic members. The Muslim community of India, who form a minority group and is demonised under the BJP's broader Hindu majoritarian agenda, has also been ridiculed by Modi with the mockery surpassing India's borders and extending to past Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf. The analysis is based on media reports contextualised within the scholarly literature on Modi's broader political style. As a comparison to Modi's humour, I present a reading of Trump's use of humour, an area where scholarship is emerging, underscoring the similarities in the punch-down humorous speech used by both leaders. In the texts presented below, the punch-down nature of humour targeted against the 'elite', academics, women, and the Muslim community, as well as widowhood, disability, mental health, and suicide, is analysed to highlight how populist leaders have co-opted the Bakhtinian carnivalesque for undemocratic gains.

### Punching Down on Suicide and Academia

At a media event in April 2023, Modi made a ‘suicide’ joke with an insult aimed at academia and women (Outlook Web Desk, 2023; Wire Staff, 2023). He told the joke in Hindi. A version translated in English on *The Wire* (Wire Staff, 2023) is quoted here:

“In our childhood, we would hear a joke. I want to tell you that.

“There was a professor and his daughter committed suicide. She left a chit, ‘I am tired of life and don’t want to live. So I will jump into the Kankaria Lake and die.’ In the morning, he saw his daughter was not at home. On the bed he found the letter. The father was very angry. “I am a professor. For so many years I have worked hard, and even now, she has spelt ‘Kankaria’ wrong.”

According to the media commentary, the attendees enjoyed a hearty laugh. Though opposition parties and other community members criticised Modi for the joke given the rising numbers of death by suicide in India over the past years (Editorial Board, 2023; HT News Desk, 2023), the sexism and the anti-intellectualism inherent in the joke appears to have not been commented upon. It is significant that it was a woman giving up her will to live. On one hand there is derision towards the deceased: despite being the daughter of an academic she is unable to spell correctly. Additionally, she is unable to cope with life’s challenges thus ending her life. On the other, there is derision towards the father who is a professor yet inept on so many levels both as a teacher and as a parent. First, he failed to teach his daughter to spell correctly; second, to raise her as a secure and strong woman; third, to notice signs of mental health issues in her; and finally, failing to express grief appropriately upon learning about her tragic death.

While the joke is clearly a punch down aimed at the *imaginary* figures of an academic and his young daughter, a further question arises: why would Modi desire to belittle such figures? As the Prime Minister of India and an internationally recognised leader, he has significant levels of power when compared to the academic and his young daughter. So why punch down? An answer may lie in the controversy surrounding the authenticity of Modi’s own university degrees. In 2016, Arvind Kejriwal, the Chief Minister of Delhi and a member of an opposition party, alleged that Modi did not possess ‘valid’ university degrees, following which the BJP ‘released’ graduate and post-graduate certificates of Modi, the authenticity of which were contested by Kejriwal and his party (Mint 2016; Reuters, 2016). Since the controversy broke, cases of defamation by the BJP on one hand, and right to information by Kejriwal’s party on the other, are being fought with the matter yet to be settled (Free Press Journal, 2023).

While describing the controversy and court rulings in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, what emerges is the significance of academics and academic credentials in the dispute and in the joke. In the joke, the *credentialled* professor figure fails on multiple levels despite his valid qualifications. In the controversy, the validity of Modi's higher education credentials is being contested despite his high-level leaderlike charisma. The punch down upon credentialled education—where the holder of such education is unable to suitably perform the task he has been credentialled for—is evident in the joke. Whereas Modi, regardless of whether his own educational credentials are authentic or not, has established himself as a celebrated leader leading the world's largest democracy. It may be argued that he attempted to undermine the importance of education, more specifically credentialled higher education, implicitly contrasting its apparent lack of value (as in the case of the symbolic professor figure) to his own high-level leaderlike abilities gained, not at any university *perhaps*, but *surely* through experience of working his way up from grassroots level politics. In the light of the contestation of his educational credentials, he is punching down upon learning gained at higher education institutions while underscoring his own high-level political abilities honed through experience on the 'real' political field. According to the joke, university-gained knowledge evidently is of little value then, in comparison to 'real' experience gained on the field.

Incidentally, Modi, in one of his *Mann Ki Baat* [Hindi: speaking from the heart] talks has spoken about suicide prevention. In one episode of this ongoing talk series aired on India's public broadcasting service All India Radio, he has urged the youth of India to give 'expression' to 'depression' instead of its 'suppression' (Kamra, 2023; Mann Ki Baat Updates, 2020). Using these three rhyming English words, he said in Hindi: 'Depression *ke* suppression *ke* vajay, iske expression *ki* zarurat hain.' The sentence translates to: 'Instead of the suppression of depression, the expression of it is necessary.' He then advised young people to openly speak with their friends, parents, brothers, and teachers about their thoughts and feelings.

Modi's joke on suicide at one event and his advice on its prevention at another talk appear to transmit contradictory messages. Taken together, the messages are comedic in their effect. First, Modi's suicide joke is a punch down that his audience at the media event found funny. Though the father and his daughter are imaginary, in terms of power, both figures are located below the position of the prime ministerial figure. Second, when the suicide joke is considered alongside his suicide-prevention advice, both messages are rendered funny to a wider public. In a video posted on Instagram by Indian stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra (2023), the audio clip of the advice and the video of the joke are edited such that one plays after another, exposing the humour in the contradictory nature of the two messages. Third, in the context of

the joke on suicide, the advice on its prevention sounds insincere, making the prime minister appear comical. Fourth, the line on suicide prevention with the three rhyming words is advisory and catchy at once. The sentence sounds didactic and slogan-like simultaneously, almost approaching a limerick.

‘Flaunting his “fifty-six-inch chest,” [Modi] scorned the outgoing prime minister as “*Maun* [silent] Mohan Singh,”’ (Ruparelia, 2019: 96). By distorting the way Manmohan Singh’s name is pronounced, Modi mocked him for the quiet demeanour that Singh is known for (Ruparelia, 2019). Singh, a long-standing member of the Congress, became Prime Minister in 2004 when a Congress-led alliance came to power following no clear majority. Sonia Gandhi, who was president of the party at that time was supposed to assume Prime Ministership but passed the role over, leading to the appointment of Singh. Dr Singh is also a highly educated person having earned a doctorate in economics from the University of Oxford (Britannica, 2024). On the surface, by mocking Singh, Modi is deriding Singh’s Congress party affiliations where Congress is the primary opposition of the BJP. More subtly, for Modi whose academic credentials are under question, mocking Singh who is scholarly, is an anti-elitist punch down at intellectualism. Despite Singh’s ‘revered’ credentials, he is quiet. This ‘quietness’ of Singh contrasts with Modi’s mighty chest and high-level oratorical abilities making Modi charismatic and Singh diminutive. Charismatic leadership is a distinctive feature of populism as ‘charisma’ embodies personality traits that can mobilise large sections of a nation’s peoples. By calling Singh ‘*maun*’, Modi is appearing to punch up at the elitism symbolised by Singh’s scholarly persona while underscoring his own professedly more common upbringing. However, it is a punch down implying that neither an elite background nor an elite education is necessary for a charismatic leaderlike personality.

### **Punching Down on Political Rivals**

Modi has used name-calling to belittle his opposition. He has mocked Rahul Gandhi, the presumptive heir to the Congress, by calling him *shehzada* (Ruparelia, 2019): a word of Persian origin (variously spelt: *shazhada*, *shahzada*) meaning ‘prince’ or ‘the son of a *shah*’ (king/ruler). At other occasions he has referred to Gandhi as ‘Rahul Baba’ (Baby Rahul), an insult aimed at infantilising him and portraying him as ‘unfit to lead the country’ (Sinha, 2017: 4169). The expressions ‘*shehzada*’ and ‘Rahul Baba’ separately, and when considered together, assume deeper significance. Modi’s use of ‘*shehzada*’ not only mocks Gandhi as a ‘decadent princeling’ (Sharma, 2014) but the word also has connotations of foreignness and, more specifically, Islam. He leverages the historical influences of Persian and Arabic languages upon Hindi to craft a double insult deriding Gandhi’s dynastic lineage. Whilst the word ‘*baba*’ means ‘father’ in many Indian languages, children both young and adult are often called *baba* in the context of expression of love

and endearment. Rahul Gandhi, though not known to have had children, is an adored child of the Gandhi family and the presumptive heir to Congress enjoying considerable privilege. Therefore, when the ‘*shehzada*’ and ‘*baba*’ insults are considered together, Gandhi’s image is diminished to that of a kingly heir born into luxury and indulgence but immature and thereby lacking in any leaderlike or kinglike competencies.

Modi has mocked Rahul Gandhi’s mother, Sonia Gandhi’s Italian origins (Sinha, 2017) and has taunted her by calling her ‘*matashree*’ (respected mother) (Chariali, 2014). At an election rally held well after assuming prime ministership, he derided Sonia Gandhi by posing a rhetorical question:

“*Ye Congress ki kaunsi vidhwa thi, jiske khaatey mein rupaya jata tha?* [Hindi] Who was that Congress’s widow in whose account this money used to go?” (Express News Service, 2018).

Modi was referring to Sonia Gandhi’s pension following the assassination of her husband Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 during an election campaign. Rajiv Gandhi served as India’s prime minister from 1984 to 1989. Sonia is Rajiv’s widow, not the Congress Party’s. However, by implicating Sonia as ‘Congress’ widow’ and eliding Rajiv Gandhi’s name—which may prompt an emotional public response as he was brutally assassinated—Modi obfuscates context making Congress stand in for Rajiv Gandhi. Gandhi (the martyr) is eclipsed by Congress (the party).

The word *vidhwa* [widow] is a laden expression in India. Traditionally, widowhood has been associated with bad luck owing to its links to death. In addition to permanent changes in dress and diet, widows are often ‘unwelcome at social events, ceremonies, and rituals, and avoided socially because they are considered bad luck, in part because of their association with death’ (Jensen, 2005: 365). These practices tend to marginalise widows by not only depriving them of certain necessities but also by screening them from public. Alluding to Sonia Gandhi’s Italian origins, Modi calls attention to the pension she draws as ‘Congress’ widow’. In addition to the elision of Rajiv Gandhi’s name, the taunt has further implications: one, Sonia is undeserving of the pension because she is not Indian born; and two, as a widow who should traditionally remain screened, she is unworthy of such recompense made through public funds.

The Nehru–Gandhi dynasty that has been at the helm of the Congress has ruled India for much of its post-independence history.<sup>1</sup> Currently, Sonia Gandhi, and her

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<sup>1</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru was India’s first prime minister and an iconic figure in India’s independence struggle alongside Mahatma Gandhi. Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi too served as India’s prime minister. Upon her assassination in 1984, her son, Rajiv, assumed office following a sweeping electoral win. However, less than seven years after his mother’s death, he too was assassinated. He is survived by Sonia, his wife, and their children.

children, Rahul and Priyanka, continue to remain important members of Congress enjoying significant political power even today, despite not being in the ruling position.<sup>2</sup> As the heir of this dynasty, Rahul is a ‘prince’ in a sense. Therefore, whilst mocking Rahul and Sonia Gandhi may not be exactly of punch *down* nature, it appears that Modi is *pretending* to be punching *up* against the aristocratic lineage of Congress, both after the point when he had assumed the powerful position as Prime Ministerial contender as well as when he had assumed his office as PM. In this context, his strategic positioning of himself as belonging to a lower-caste humble background facilitated in consolidating his ‘outsider’ location. From this location, his mockery of the Gandhis appears as punching *up* at their aristocratic heritage. However, given his position as a Prime Ministerial contender and subsequently winning that position, Modi—even if coming from a humble background—is not without power. Therefore, though perceived as punching *up* at the Gandhis, Modi is in essence punching *down* at them.

The appearance of punching up at power is a feature of authoritarian populist rhetoric. Donald Trump, for example, maintained the idea that he was fighting against power (such as the ‘deep state’ and the ‘elites’) even when he himself was in the White House. It is ironic that his electoral promise to ‘drain the swamp’ (Evans, 2018) was followed by the appointment of a cabinet that included, among others, billionaires (Kellner, 2017) who themselves are members of the elite. Therefore, the position that such leaders desire to be *perceived* as having taken is one of opposition to the elites. By proclaiming to ‘drain the swamp’ in the case of Trump, and by mocking the political opponent’s prince-like status in the case of Modi, both politicians aim to obscure—or at least divert attention from—their very own positions of high-level power. It is an irony that those who are already powerfully located, are *themselves* mockingly calling for the stripping of powers of others (‘drain’) and calling out the position of power occupied by others (‘*shehzada*’). These callouts are not punching up in essence. Additionally, there is humour in the fact that individuals who are powerful themselves, are calling out the power of others. The adage of the pot and kettle comes to mind.

In the ridiculing of political opponents, both Trump and Modi have occupied the space typically reserved for the clown as theorised by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. ‘Like Rabelais, Trump understood that crude humor has the power to bring down the princely classes – aka, the political establishment’ (Goldstein, Hall and Ingram, 2020: 98). Similarly, Modi too is aware of the power of ridicule in destabilising the long-held powers

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<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, the historical trajectory of the Nehru-Gandhi family is at odds with the values of democracy. Though this paper stands *with* Bakhtin’s democratic vision in the critical examination of Modi’s use of humour against this dynasty, it does *not* support dynastic lineages in democratic politics.

of the Nehruvian political settlement symbolised currently by the Gandhis. However, a distinction needs to be made between Modi and Trump regarding their embodied 'clown' personhood and the *extent* of crudeness in their use of mocking humour.

Mockery about ingestion, bowels, sex, and bodily effluents bears direct reference to the concept of the grotesque '[m]aterial [l]ower [b]odily [s]tratum' (Bakhtin, 1984b: 368), which for Bakhtin is the 'mighty thrust downward [...] into the depths of the human body' (1984b: 370) bearing the potential to 'humanise', and thereby dislodge, what is considered lofty or exalted. Modi's mockery of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty has not taken recourse to the Bakhtinian 'material bodily lower stratum' yet. Though he has sustainedly maligned the historical Nehru-Gandhi dynastic members, called the present-day members names, and likened Rahul to dyslexia sufferers (examined below), his derogation of the dynasty has not yet been 'vulgar' like Trump's derision of 'Hillary Clinton's toilet behaviors' (Goldstein, Hall and Ingram, 2020: 98).

Neither is Modi's personhood perceived as grotesque. While Trump's body is theorised as 'grotesque' and has its own electoral lure, with his enactment of his rivals' bodily gaits and movements on stage (Goldstein, Hall and Ingram, 2020), Modi has attempted to be immaculate in his own presentation of his body through high-level fashion and styling (Vittorini, 2022) that could be said to be fit for a 'king uphold[ing] the dharmic order' (Appadurai, 2021: 306). Dressed in carefully selected clothing always and elaborate headgear often, Modi's presentation of his body is more measured than Trump's. Though during speeches, he consistently uses his hands and arms to make specific points and sweeping grand gestures, he has not made use of his full body to mimic his rivals, as Trump has done. While Trump's persona is 'buffoonish' (Danesi, 2022: 29), Modi's is stately. While the extent of 'clowning' and the nature of self-presentation may differ, both Modi and Trump have assumed the position of the Rabelaisian clown, mocking their rivals to humour their electorate, and to sustain their support.

### **Punching Down on Disability**

Mockery of disability is also not outside the purview of Modi and Trump's political discourse. Trump was widely criticised for his mimicry of a disabled reporter during his presidential campaign in 2015 (ABC, 2015). Modi has used the condition of dyslexia to mock Rahul Gandhi and his mother. At a science competition where students were presenting projects aimed at creating technology-based solutions to address issues about women and children, Modi ridiculed the Gandhi mother-and-son duo whilst a student presented her project designed to help dyslexic children (NDTV, 2019). As the student described this condition of learning disorder to Modi, he interrupted her and asked:

“Will this program also work for a 40 to 50 year old child?” When the student replied with a “Yes, it will work,” the PM said: “Then that will make the mothers of such children very happy” (Free Press Journal, 2019).

Modi, whose taunt was directed at Gandhi and his mother Sonia, elicited criticism from the opposition and from members of the public suffering from the condition (D’Souza, 2019; Mudur, 2019; Pandey, 2019). By referring to Rahul Gandhi as a ‘40- to 50-year-old child’, Modi reinforces his earlier name-calling of him as ‘Rahul Baba’, infantilising him and denigrating his image as a competent leader further.

The joke also has significance for dyslexia as a medical condition and the public perception of those suffering from the condition. While the joke diminishes the value of the work undertaken over decades by researchers, medical professionals, and other healthcare workers in raising awareness and dispelling widely held societal misconceptions about the condition (Jebaraj, 2019), Modi also renders the characteristics of Gandhi and dyslexic people as interchangeable. The ‘negative’ qualities with which Gandhi has been attributed by Modi become transferable to people with dyslexia. It is here that humour becomes punch-down. Unlike Trump’s more direct mimicry of the disabled reporter, Modi’s paralleling of Gandhi with dyslexia sufferers is a taunt aimed obliquely at disability. The remark portrays dyslexic people as infantile by association: in addition to learning difficulties—a real condition of dyslexia—they are depicted as inept and useless, disavowing them the other forms of intellectual and creative abilities that they may possess. Though oblique, Modi’s derision of dyslexia is not wholly dissimilar to Trump’s direct mimicry of the disabled reporter. They are both ableist punch downs upon disability. Furthermore, as the participating students were presenting to Modi in an event that was being live telecast to thousands of students around the nation, this punch-down remark by the prime minister aimed at his opposition using the premise of dyslexia tends towards a certain kind of messaging—specifically to the young people of the country, given he was directly conversing with them—that joking about disability is acceptable.

### **Punching Down on Muslim People**

Modi’s use of derogatory humour against the Muslim community goes beyond the simple anti-elitism studied above in his jokes about his rivals and the academia. His anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan rhetoric tends to surface at key electoral moments including the recent general elections held in April–June 2024 (Mukhopadhyay, 2019; Venkatesh, 2024). Populist leadership relies on mobilising the ‘common’ people against a group that is constructed as the ‘enemy’. In BJP’s case, as seen above, the enemy includes those conventionally considered as ‘elites’, opposition parties, and



minority religious groups of India particularly the Muslim community who constitute about 14% of the entire population. Islamophobic speech has become common under Modi's rule as the community continues to be systematically demonised. Donald Trump is also known for his disparagement of immigrants, Mexicans, and particularly Muslims whom he has repeatedly linked to terrorist activities. Notable among his denigration of Muslims is his ridicule of the immigrant parents of a Muslim soldier killed in service in Iraq (BBC, 2016; Kellner, 2016). At a Democratic convention, the father of the deceased young man made an emotional address grieving the loss of his son and criticising Trump for his disdain of Muslims and immigrants as the mother silently stood by. In a punch down targeted at their religious identity, Trump tweeted that the mother who stood silently beside her husband, did so as Muslims did not allow their women to speak in public.

Modi's punch-down humour targeting Muslim people can be traced back to the time when he became chief minister of the state of Gujarat in 2001 (Slater, 2002). He also deploys the Bakhtinian 'downward thrust' in his denigration of Muslim practises around polygamy and childbirth. According to media reports (Mukhopadhyay, 2017, 2019), he has mocked Muslim people in a public speech by describing them as 'baby producing factories' who 'breed' rapidly, and therefore family planning measures need to be implemented so they do not overrun the Hindu population in Gujarat.

"We want to firmly implement family planning," began Modi before switching to the first person speaking as a Muslim: "*hum paanch, humare pachees* (we five, our 25)," and laughed derisively (Mukhopadhyay, 2017).

While the Hindi phrase has rhyming and alliteration features making it sound catchy, it is also an insult aimed at Muslim marriage law. 'We five, our 25 [in other words, 'we are five and we have twenty-five']' refers to Muslim polygamy that allows a man to have up to four wives. While Modi symbolically refers to the spousal unit comprising one man and his four wives as five, he rhetorically suggests that the number of children this unit shares among them is twenty-five. Notwithstanding this mocking essentialisation of Muslim polygamy, its concept is far more complex and nuanced. 'Marriages up to four women are valid, but conditions of equal love and justice are also stipulated in the Quran with a context. It was precisely meant for orphans and war-widows to provide them security through marriage' (Sur, 2023: 6). Therefore, the 'we five, our 25' punch-down remark followed by derisive laughter deny Muslim polygamy the tenets of love, justice, and compassion, upon which the practice is meant to be fostered, reducing Muslims to 'baby producing factories.'

Modi's derision of Muslims extended to General Pervez Musharraf, past president of Pakistan, whom he referred to as 'Mian Musharraf' publicly (Mukhopadhyay, 2017; Ramaseshan, 2002). 'Mian' [Urdu; also 'miyān', Persian] is a title of respect for an older man used by Muslim peoples in everyday parlance. By referring to Musharraf as 'Mian', Modi again appears to be punching up at Pakistan's leader. However, by *not* referring to Musharraf as 'General' or 'President' or simply 'Musharraf', Modi punches down reducing his political identity to his religion, denying any respect—even if only superficial—that the leader of one state is deserving of, particularly from a political figure of another. During his chief ministerial campaign, Modi linked Gujarati Muslims to Musharraf, Pakistan, and terrorists, not only 'otherising' and demonising Muslims extensively, but also collapsing their varied identities into the one common denomination of their religion; and consequently, connecting Islam to terrorism categorically, as Trump did in his own country.

## Conclusion

Despite vastly different cultural contexts, populist politicians such as Trump and Modi play a curiously similar carnival game of strongman mockery that is conceptually rooted in Bakhtin's theorisation of the festive form. However, while the Bakhtinian model is ethical and democratic, these leaders have co-opted it for undemocratic gains. This study has offered a comparative analysis of Trump and Modi's carnivalesque speech forms wherein they ridiculed political opponents, women, people with disabilities, and the Muslim community. In Modi's case particularly, widowhood, intellectualism, mental health, and death by suicide have also been mocked. Such mockery on part of these leaders is punch-down in essence, notwithstanding their own positioning of themselves as outsiders punching up at the elite. Their speech influenced public opinion and evidently voter outcomes as Trump won the presidency in 2016, and Modi won three consecutive terms (2014, 2019 and 2024). The jokes and insults of Modi studied here shine a light upon the nature of political effect that is being sought through such use of disparaging humour: the motivation behind Modi's tweets calling for more humour in public life is evident. While Bakhtin conceptualised carnival as a popular festive form inverting accepted social hierarchies, this model is co-opted by Trump and Modi in their punch-down use of humour to maintain the status quo. Such carnivalesque forms that are anti-progressive, anti-democratic, and discriminatory, tend to reinforce hierarchical order, further marginalising those already on the margins. This 'inverted carnival' model is a novel framework that may be useful in studies of punch-down humour aimed at preserving hierarchies in systems of governance around the world.

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## Acknowledgements

I respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong People, the traditional custodians of the unceded lands where I live and conduct my research. I also acknowledge their Ancestors and Elders, past and present.

I thank my supervisors, the humour studies academics at RMIT, and appreciate the feedback I received at the AHSN 2023 Annual Conference, where I presented on the Bakhtinian carnival model. I also thank Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, formerly of Jadavpur University, for his discussions on Bakhtin.

I appreciate the valuable feedback from the reviewers and the editors of this special issue.

I am grateful for the support provided by RMIT University's Research Training Program Scholarship.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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