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Modi's "Digital India" and the Mother Goddess: Fantasy as Legitimation

ABSTRACT: This article examines two fantasies promoted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and how they apparently function to legitimize his authoritarian regime. We argue that his "Digital India" program, notwithstanding its failures as public policy, has served as a fantasy about national transformation through technology. Secondly, Modi's promotion of the "Mother India" fantasy—personification of the country as a Hindu goddess—fosters a false sense of national unity at the expense of ethnic and religious minorities and diverts attention from the real social and economic problems facing India. *Keywords*: authoritarianism, fantasy, intolerance, legitimation, mother archetype, nationalism.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, aka *"NaMo,"* is one of the world's most politically successful authoritarian leaders. He has achieved legitimacy, we will argue, largely by promoting two fantasies. The first, "Digital India," appeals to corporate elites, especially in the high tech sector. It also appeals to an Indian population eager for an escapist magic cure for deep-seated social and economic problems. The second fantasy is "Mother India"—the archetypal personification of the country as a Hindu mother goddess.

DIGITAL UTOPIA OR DYSTOPIA?

Modi launched his dream campaign Digital India about a year after his May 2014 election as prime minister. On the one hand, this program is a tech industry and finance friendly development plan to bring the whole population into cyberspace. On the other hand, it is a nationalist fantasy about a new and futuristic India that has left behind poverty, sectarian violence, superstition, and class conflict. Of India's 1.21 billion people, 22% live on less than 1.25 US dollars per day, caste stratification remains entrenched, and violence against women and ethnic minorities continues to mar everyday life. Digital India legitimizes NaMo's power by giving ordi-

nary Indians the false hope of security and prosperity through technology, and giving the country's elites a new business card with which to present themselves to their counterparts in more economically developed Western and Asian countries.

Meanwhile, Digital India's actual policies impose horrendous hardships on an already oppressed population. On the eve of Modi's electronic banking initiative, to take just one component of Digital India, over 90% of the country's workforce (including tea-vendors, the vocation in which NaMo first earned a living) received their wages in cash. More than 600 million Indians reside in localities without any bank, a population larger than Japan or Bangladesh. The ostensible rationale for "demonetization," as the policy is also known, was that digitized e-transactions would bring banking to these masses. But the reality is a technological dystopia that deprives the poor and middle class of control over yet another aspect of their daily lives. The majority have been unable to access this brave new world of electronic banking even as Modi's ban on paper currency has thrown the traditional cash system into chaos.[1] Meanwhile, the minority who *have* mastered the new technology just end up with the privilege of having their lives under the constant surveillance of the financial industry and government tax collectors.

Notable aspects of NaMo's demonetization include the autocratic way it was formulated and implemented, and the self-righteous mentality evident in its promotion. Former Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor Raghuram Rajan said that he and the RBI never supported the policy and had cautioned government officials about the consequences, since paper currency then accounted for 86% of the country's money supply. As predicted, what ensued was catastrophic, the "greatest blunder in economic policy for 70 years," according to senior economist-journalist Arun Shourie. The resulting economic disruption caused 105 deaths in the first 45 days. For example, patients needing urgent care were turned away because hospitals could no longer accept cash and some people literally died waiting in long lines to get access to their funds. While such cases were the extreme, stress and suffering caused by the ill-conceived policy have been devastating and pervasive.

The political context of Modi's demonetization is psychohistorically revealing. The 2014 general election occurred after ten years of scandal-plagued governments led by the Indian National Congress. In addition to promising economic development and a tougher stance on national security, Modi positioned himself as an anti-corruption crusader who would bring back "black money" allegedly stashed abroad and return 1.5 million rupees to every citizen. This fantasy resonated with the majority, and

NaMo came to power amidst a wave of renewed optimism and euphoria. The sober policy analyses of economists were overwhelmed by a popular conviction that Modi was beginning to deliver on his campaign promises. Reserve Bank of India reports show that demonetization has been ineffective in achieving its stated objectives and disastrous considering the hardships, loss of life and damage to the informal sectors of the economy. This confirms the experience of hundreds of millions but falls on deaf ears for much of the populace still in the grip of the Digital India group fantasy.

A psychohistorically interesting feature of this policy fiasco is the way it was cloaked in a mantle of self-righteousness. Modi vilified the paper currency as a repository of unaccountable "black money" and framed demonetization as a moral panacea that would eradicate vices ranging from corruption to terrorism. This "cash hidden under pillows" picture, propagated by Hindi popular cinema, is not consistent with how unaccountable wealth actually works. As Prof. Arun Kumar has shown, most of it is not held in the form of currency but rather as jewelry and other physical or financial property. More importantly, "black money" must be understood not as a stock of value but rather as the continuous flow or process that generates it, for example, under- or over-invoicing, tax sheltering, and similar practices. Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen summed up demonetization as "a disaster" and "despotic" and said that it "struck at the root of an economy based on trust" (*The Hindu*, 2016).

One additional Digital India initiative worth noting is Modi's policy regarding "Aadhaar," a biometric and demographic identification system comparable to social security numbers. This system was launched in 2009 before he came to power, but under NaMo's administration was made compulsory. In March 2018, economist and activist Jean Drèze called this development "terrifying" and advocated reconsideration of the policy. The issue is the government's surveillance powers, which have set off alarm bells about potential abuses of privacy rights. "Aadhaar enables the government to access and link wide-ranging databases that hold a wealth of personal information," Drèze said. "Contrary to official claims, the Aadhaar Act offers virtually no protection against possible misuse of that information" (Dreze, 2018).

Reason for such concern was recently uncovered in a sting operation by Cobrapost, an undercover journalism organization. A Vice President of Paytm (the Indian equivalent of PayPal) had congratulated Mr. Modi on his brave and historic demonetization policy through front-page ads across all of India's major dailies. Cobrapost found that this executive admitted giving private information of some Paytm users to the Prime Minister's office.

The national security rationale he used to justify this breach—the need to track down Kashmiri separatist militants—is at best a slippery slope that threatens the privacy of opposition political parties, activists, dissidents or anyone government officials deem a threat to their power.

MOTHER FANTASIES AND NATIONALISM

Even as Digital India adds electronic surveillance to the traditional forms of oppression of the poor and middle classes, Modi's ruling party evokes another fantasy, that of "one big family" under Bharat Mata, literally, "Mother India." This is a deep and long-standing archetype rooted in personification of the country as a Hindu mother goddess. A 1957 cult-classic entitled "Mother India" strongly influenced all subsequent Hindi films, as noted by Bollywood screenwriter Javed Akhtar. In the acclaimed Hindi film *Shanghai* (a 2012 adaptation of themes from Vassilis Vassilikos' novel *Z* and Konstantinos Costa-Gavras' film of the same name), a *Hail Mother India* song and dance routine is satirically juxtaposed with the assassination of a political activist.

NaMo came up the ranks of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) movement. In 2016, the movement's leader declared: "Now the time has come when we have to tell the new generation to chant 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai' (Hail Mother India). It should be real, spontaneous and part of all-round development of the youth." In 2017, military officials chanted the Hindu nationalist "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" in an official meeting, violating the equal treatment of religions enshrined in the 42nd Amendment of India's Constitution.

Speaking of mothers, the question naturally arises how the *Bharat Mata* archetype operates in NaMo's own psychobiography, as well as in Indian group psychology. In an important 2016 article in *The New Republic*, Siddhartha Deb uncovers the "violence, insecurity, and rage" in Modi's political career. The literature on authoritarianism frequently traces the etiology of such complexes to punitive fathers (Reich, 1933/1971; Adorno et al, 1950/1993), but it does not appear that Modi's own father provided a model for the kind of macho leader he has become. His pre-Oedipal attachment dynamics will no doubt prove more illuminating for psychobiographers, but we (the authors) don't know enough about his mother or his relationship with her to say more.

The roots of machismo in negation of a male's mother introjects may be relevant here. Quality of mothering is not the only issue, but also social construction of the "masculine" ideal based on negation of the "feminine," which gives rise to a chronic discrepancy between gender socialization and

mother introjects, and thus a chronic gender insecurity and tendency to "prove one's manhood" (D'Agostino, 2018). Devaluation of actual women in Indian society, masked by veneration of the mother archetype, further suggests the relevance of this analysis, which builds on the feminist psychoanalytic writings of Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein.

The low social status of Modi's family is another key ingredient of his psychobiography. Along with about half the country's population, the particular merchant caste of his family is classified by the government of India as an "Other Backward Class." One can only imagine the feelings of inferiority and repressed antipathy towards privileged elites experienced by these groups.

For lower class Indians, the historic experience of colonialism compounded this humiliation. Many responded with an anti-colonialism that is internationalist in spirit and identifies with other marginalized groups. Hindu nationalists including Modi, however, adopted the opposite response—embracing the caste system's legitimation of social inequality and construing India's religious heritage as superior to all others. Also, in a political move that parallels Donald Trump's and his followers' attack on liberal "elites," the Hindu nationalists accuse the progressive intelligentsia of appeasing minorities with welfare and other government policies in the name of multiculturalism and at the expense of middle class taxpayers.

In 1967, at the age of seventeen, Modi began a tour of Hindu *ashrams* (monasteries) established by Swami Vivekananda, but was largely snubbed by this community due to lack of requisite education. Interestingly, Vivekananda is considered by many as a precursor of India's socialist tradition. Modi, on the other hand, was close to the Hindu nationalist RSS in his youth and eventually became a full-time activist. He was also competently engaged in dramaturgy, and some of the epic characters he played shaped his later political career. Many commentators see him as an actor *par excellence*.

Modi's promotion of the Hindu goddess fantasy in a vastly multicultural country underscores his troubled relationship with religious minorities and marginalized groups generally. Although his family often celebrated festivals with Muslim friends, inter-ethnic relations deteriorated under his watch as Chief minister of Gujarat, culminating in the 2002 and 2003 riots that left 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus dead and nearly 3,000 missing or injured. Police and government officials, including Modi himself, were almost certainly complicit with the anti-Muslim violence but were never held accountable and NaMo never took responsibility for his role in the violence. Nor did he take responsibility for the killings of Untouchables ("Dalits") on his watch.

Finally, under Modi, violence against political dissidents and activists has continued and most likely worsened (Mondal, 2017). In February 2015, during his tenure as prime minister, Communist leader and columnist Govind Pansare was killed near Mumbai. M. M. Kalburgi, a scholar and critic of superstition among Hindus, was murdered at his own doorstep six months later. Gauri Lankesh, an outspoken critic of right-wing Hindu extremism, was shot to death by unknown assassins outside her residence in Bangalore on September 5, 2017. The internationally renowned playwright, Girish Karnad, received death threats after he casually uttered that the International Airport at Bangalore might be named after Tipu Sultan, an Eighteenth Century Muslim ruler of the region, celebrated for his resistance to the British. In Modi's India, violent intolerance is conspicuous and pervasive; it needs to be viewed in the context of the Mother India cult, which marginalizes and vilifies those who deviate from Hindu nationalist ideals.

CONCLUSION

At the present time, the future of Narendra Modi's legacy is unclear. 65% of India's billion-plus people are younger than 35, and NaMo's appeal as a father figure to this younger generation remains strong. At the same time, however, his authoritarian proclivities are creating a backlash. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has faced repeated defeats in recent special elections. Sting operations by Cobrapost, the undercover journalism organization, have exposed many scandals, most recently one in which mainstream journalists admitted receiving lavish payoffs for circulating Hindu doctrines, fomenting communal riots, and other misconduct. Such challenges to BJP's supremacy will no doubt continue, but the prospects for more enlightened political leadership remain uncertain.

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ENDNOTE

1. In November 2016, Modi announced that 500 and 1,000 rupee notes would no longer be valid, which affected the entire populace. By contrast, the demonetizations of 1946 and 1978 were far less consequential because the 1,000 and 10,000 rupee notes retired in those years were worth much more than their value today and were not in wide circulation.

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