

Title Page

**Biography and the Formation of Indian Political Personas**

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of History

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary

2023

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## Abstract

Biographies have been heralded as one among many tools in a politician's arsenal for building a public persona, although they are not always authorised, often involving several interested actors, including authors, publishers and distributors and the media. At least thirty books on Narendra Modi, India's current prime minister, have been published over the last decade, coinciding with his rise to power in 2014. This trend is comparable within Indian politics to how a former prime minister, Indira Gandhi, became a go-to subject for biographers. While their frequent lack of critical distance, rhetorical exaggeration and contributions to myth-making have led leader biographies to be dismissed by historians, they do represent narratives that strive to build a vision of a political leader, as well as to create cultural memory and convey a view of the nation.

Given that print is arguably marginal among media that majorly shaped the Indian public sphere in the twentieth century, what does the continued publication of leader biographies signal? What are their chosen textual and literary strategies, and how do aspects of language, anecdote, affect and narrative shape the representation of the leader and nation? How do the texts' promotion, reception and public afterlives alter the place they occupy within the national story? And finally, how do they contribute to the formulation of national memory at different periods?

Pointing to the personalisation of power in both Modi and Gandhi's regimes, I carry out close critical readings of biographies and books based around their personas, drawing on political history, media theory, interviews, and studies of life-writing around the world to formulate my response to larger questions about the phenomenon of biography and how they might promote, rehabilitate or celebrate political legacies and the leader's role within the nation.

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# Introduction, Literature Review and Frameworks

## Introduction

In the summer of 2021, the author Pankaj Mishra wrote an open letter questioning his publisher, Penguin Random House, after it announced that it would be publishing a second edition of *Exam Warriors*. Authored by India's prime minister Narendra Modi, and first published in 2018, it is a short book for children that collates pithy phrases about tests and how to take them well. As a response to Mishra's questions about what led them to promote Modi's book, and thereby "enlist in a flailing politician's propaganda campaign," the publisher wrote back saying that they value all their authors and that their publishing decisions are guided by "strong sales and marketing teams."<sup>1</sup>

"PRH and other foreign-affiliated imprints in India have a heavier responsibility for keeping alive a public sphere and the possibility of intellectual and creative life," Mishra subsequently told *The Guardian*. "Some of them might decide that they are just another company trying to profit in an 'emerging' market, and can't afford to take a stance against violence and bigotry."<sup>2</sup> This exchange could easily be waved away on the grounds that publishing decisions are driven primarily by sales, as the publisher had indicated. And there certainly *was* public demand for the book—it became a bestseller the year it was published.<sup>3</sup> Five years later, it continues to be talked about regularly in the press, but for various other reasons, including its re-release, or a highly-funded offshoot

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<sup>1</sup> Pankaj Mishra, "Pankaj Mishra," *LRB Blog* (London Review of Books, May 17, 2021), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2021/may/ethical-responsibilities>.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Flood, "Indian Authors Speak out over Plan to Reissue Narendra Modi Exam Book," *The Guardian* (The Guardian, May 20, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/20/indian-authors-speak-out-over-plan-to-reissue-narendra-modi-exam-book>.

<sup>3</sup> H. T. Correspondent, "HT-Nielsen Top 10: PM Narendra Modi's Exam Warriors Continues to Lead Non-Fiction List," *The Hindustan Times* (Hindustan Times, March 3, 2018), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/ht-nielsen-top-10-pm-narendra-modi-s-exam-warriors-continues-to-lead-non-fiction-list/story-4jy8KryNz8jff1ldO2tgCO.html>

initiative<sup>4</sup> involving the prime minister organising an annual masterclass<sup>5</sup> on exams, or events where the book is relaunched in different languages by governors and chief ministers across the country. These present the opportunity to discuss the prime minister's benevolence and concern for citizens<sup>6</sup>, and to reenact such discussions under the guise of addressing an ever-present apolitical phenomenon like exams.

However, situating this criticism levied at Penguin within the political context in which it was made is vital here. The book is one of myriad instances of publishers printing material, directed at the public, that advances a personalised and relatable version of Modi. This emphasis on accessibility represents a broader tendency towards the leader's own personalisation of power, and saturating the public sphere with his presence,<sup>7</sup> that academics and researchers have noted as components of his political strategy. Print forms only one—and arguably a relatively marginal one—of the ways in which contemporary media has been harnessed to promote, reinvent and rehabilitate his public persona.

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<sup>4</sup> Live, “‘Pariksha Pe Charcha’: Report,” *Mint*, last modified January 14, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pariksha-pe-charcha-annual-expenditure-increased-65-from-2019-to-2022-report-11673685368926.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Papri Chanda, “PM Modi Launches Masterclass for Exam Warriors,” *The Hindustan Times* (Hindustan Times, January 12, 2023), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/news/pariksha-pe-charcha-2023-pm-modi-launches-masterclass-for-exam-warriors-101673529440820.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *Arunachal24.In*, January 19, 2023, <https://arunachal24.in/arunachal-governor-launches-exam-warriors-book-written-by-prime-minister-narendra-modi/>.

<sup>7</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Chennai, India: Westland Publications, 2021). p. 1

## Narendra Modi's rise to power

Narendra Damodardas Modi was born in 1950 in Vadnagar, Gujarat to a family from the Ghanchi caste (listed as part of the Other Backward Castes since the 1990s, the community's traditional occupations of the caste included pressing and selling oil). They were poor, and his father used to run a tea shop. At the age of eight, he joined a local unit, or *shakha*, of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), or the National Volunteers Association. The organisation, which thoroughly shaped Modi's political outlook as he rose ranks within it, is the ideological parent of the current ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It has branches across the nation, which provides games and exercises for children, training for older members, as well as history and ideology lessons, in which a glorious history of the nation is propounded.<sup>8</sup> Modi became a full-time member in the 1960s.

The RSS was founded in 1925 to defend Hindu majoritarianism, improve Hindu physical strength and aim to make India a Hindu *rashtra*—or nation—premised on the ideology of Hindutva, or political Hindu nationalism.<sup>9</sup> Hindu mobilisation was well underway in the nineteenth century as a reaction to colonial dominance, but Hindu nationalism began to be fortified, both as an ideology and movement, in concurrence with—and as an alternative vision to—MK Gandhi's mass non-violent movement, attempts to forge Hindu-Muslim unity<sup>10</sup> and the Congress's "inclusive territorial nationalism."<sup>11</sup> Consisting of cadres, and separated from politics, it focussed instead on working "at the grassroots in order to reform Hindu society from below," expanding rapidly to becoming the biggest Hindu-nationalist movement, with 600,000 volunteers

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<sup>8</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, p. 14

<sup>9</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 16

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4 - 6

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen and Srirupa Roy, eds., *Saffron Republic: Hindu Nationalism and State Power in India* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 221

by 1947.<sup>12</sup> However, in 1948, Nathuram Godse, a member<sup>13</sup> of the RSS, assassinated MK Gandhi, and the prime minister at the time, Jawaharlal Nehru, banned the organisation (which was lifted the following year), which led the organisation to develop several different fronts, moving into the political realm in 1951 with the Bharatiya Jana Sangh—the BJP’s forerunner—as well as forming an affiliated student union, workers’ union and trade union. The BJP was founded in 1980.

Hindu nationalism surged to immense national prominence during the 1980s, primarily because of the Ayodhya movement. Led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad—World Council of Hindus—affiliated to the RSS, it aimed to build a temple at the sight of a sixteenth-century mosque, the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya, arguing that the spot constitutes the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. The movement gathered particular momentum in the early 1990s, with a country-wide rally led by the BJP president. Thousands of Hindu nationalists gathered and demolished the mosque in 1992, which was followed by largescale communal riots and at least 900 deaths across the country. Despite the support it had garnered because of the movement, the BJP did not win in more than a few states in the 1990s and had to rely on coalition governments and adopt a more moderate approach to Hindu-nationalist agendas—that is, until 2014, when it “interlaced Hindutva with populism”<sup>14</sup> with Modi as the main face of the party, and swept to power.<sup>15</sup>

Modi had already been chief minister of Gujarat, though his tenure had been shadowed by a pogrom that occurred during his first term. On the morning of 27 February 2002, a train that was carrying *kar sevaks*, or Hindu-nationalist activists, on their way back from a celebration in

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<sup>12</sup> Tanika Sarkar, “Who Rules India? A Few Notes on the Hindu Right,” *Revista canaria de estudios ingleses*, no. 76 (2018): 223–229, p. 8

<sup>13</sup> There is a widespread notion of him being a former member; however, Dharendra K Jha has argued that there is no concrete evidence of Nathuram Godse having ever quit the RSS. See also, Dharendra K. Jha, “Historical Records Expose the Lie That Nathuram Godse Left the RSS,” *The Caravan*, last modified January 1, 2020, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/historical-record-expose-lie-godse-left-rss>.

<sup>14</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, p.5

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22

Ayodhya, to mark the demolition of the Babri Masjid a decade before. When the train arrived at Godhra, they began shouting nationalist slogans.<sup>16</sup> After a clash with local Muslims<sup>17</sup>— details of which are hazy since they have been stated and contradicted in reports since—a deadly act of arson, in which a coach was burnt, led to the deaths of 59 people, including women and children. The acts of retaliatory violence led by Hindu extremists that followed resulted in the deaths, according to official estimates, of 697 Muslims, 177 Hindus, and 170 in police firing, of which 93 were Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Among the incidents of violence was a mob siege of Gulberg society, a largely Muslim housing colony that lasted for over six hours, resulting in the deaths of 69 people; it was most likely targeted because it was the residence of Ehsan Jaffri, a Muslim Congress Party member, who had been campaigning against Modi. Modi claimed he was unaware until hours after. Eventually, the Special Investigation Team looking into his possible culpability gave him a clean chit. Others in the BJP, such as Maya Kodnani, who led a mob of ten thousand that killed 97 Muslims, were convicted (and later acquitted). Modi avoided publicly expressing remorse over Godhra. The following year, he won an election on a campaign of religious polarisation, where he was introduced as Hindu Hriday Samrat—the Emperor of Hindu Hearts.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, after what transpired in 2002, he was also faced with international sanctions, including being denied a visa to the United States, and domestic criticism as well, (initially even from a member

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<sup>16</sup> Manoj Mitta, *Modi and Godhra - the Fiction of Fact Finding* (New Delhi, India: HarperCollins, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Drawing on information from tribunal hearings, Jaffrelot provides a summary of the incident, issuing a caveat at the end: “The kar sevaks were singing Hindu nationalist songs and chanting slogans, some of which were offensive to Muslims. One Muslim family was forced off the moving train for refusing to utter the kar sevaks’s war cry: “Jai Shri Ram!” (Long live the god Ram!) At the stop in Godhra, the first city in Gujarat on the train’s route, a Muslim shopkeeper was ordered to shout the same slogan and refused, and the kar sevaks turned on a Muslim woman with her two daughters. One of them was forced to board the train. They had hardly left the station when a passenger pulled the emergency chain. It was yanked several times, until the train came to a halt in the middle of a Muslim neighborhood inhabited by Ghanchis, a community from which many of the Godhra street vendors at the station hailed. Hundreds of Muslims then allegedly attacked with stones and torches, particularly the two wagons where the fifty-nine victims were found. The facts must be stated with caution here, because expert reports and counter reports have continued to contradict each other ever since.” *Modi’s India*, p. 39

<sup>18</sup> Hartosh Singh Bal, *Redefining a Riot: Panagariya, Bhagwati Write to The Economist-Politics News*, *Firstpost* (Firstpost, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, p. 42

of the BJP<sup>20</sup>) particularly from the English-speaking media. He also acquired notoriety among the business community—the violence had disrupted the economy and caused them financial losses. Thereon, he strived to remake his persona, self-presenting as Vikas Purush—Development Man<sup>21</sup>; contrasting his solitariness, lower-caste and modest class background with the elite dynasty party, the Congress, that had accrued power and privilege over generations; and gained favour with industrialists while also making promises to the poor. His popularity stems from these and myriad other aspects, such as his ties with the RSS, strongman charisma, “otherization” of Muslims, and, importantly, his perceived position as a unifier of Hindus.<sup>22</sup>

“Saturation of the public sphere”

In 2012, Arvind Kejriwal and his Aam Aadmi Party gained massive support through conventional forms of media and social media, but by 2014 the BJP was flooding the media sphere<sup>23</sup> and the election that year was the most personalised election India had seen, drawing comparisons with US-style presidential elections.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the media focused on Modi’s personality and charisma more than party ideology or manifestos, besides representing him as the face of change.<sup>25</sup> A media lab study indicated that Modi dominated more than one-third of prime-time news across five channels<sup>26</sup>—he got coverage on around 33 percent of prime-time news episodes between 1 March and 30 April and even more in the days that preceded the polling, while opponents such as Kejriwal, and Rahul Gandhi from the Congress, had around 10 and 4 percent, respectively.<sup>27</sup> One estimate suggested the BJP spent around a billion dollars on

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<sup>20</sup> “The Tribune, Chandigarh, India - Main News,” *Tribuneindia.com*, <https://m.tribuneindia.com/2002/20020408/main3.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Sanjay Srivastava, “Modi-Masculinity: Media, Manhood, and ‘Traditions’ in a Time of Consumerism” p. 333

<sup>24</sup> Sudhir Pattnaik, “Media, Corporates, and Democracy: Lessons from the 2014 General Elections,” in *The Algebra of Warfare-Welfare* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 279

<sup>25</sup> Sandeep Bhushan: “The persona of Narendra Modi as an agent of change has been, by and large, a construction of TV coverage. In the run- up to the general election, it appeared as if every TV channel was pushing Modi. The coverage was unprecedented. He was omnipresent. It was similar to an ad barrage”

<sup>26</sup> Zoya Hassan, “The Gujarat Model and the Right-Wing Shift in 2014,” in *The Algebra of Warfare Welfare*, p. 149

<sup>27</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, p. 99

the election campaign (at the time comparable only to an Obama presidential campaign, though the US income per capita is nearly thirty times that of India).<sup>28</sup>

Some argue that there are few contenders, in India's political history, in terms of the sheer breadth, and "frenzied" intensity of the image-making project.<sup>29</sup> Prior to Modi's first term, the Hindu-nationalist movement had not been influenced, to this degree, by a single individual, particularly as the RSS inculcated an atmosphere of collegiality rather than encouraging individual ego. Therefore, plenty has been written to interpret efforts, over the last two decades, to inundate the public sphere with Modi's presence. Visuals of Modi had started becoming ubiquitous in Gujarat in 2002, and over ten years later, there was a palpable emphasis on image-making in Modi's electoral campaigning at the national level. "In 2014, Modi saturated the public sphere, taking the country by storm, behaving like a muscular rock star on stage (endowed with a '56-inch chest'), and resorting to TV, social media, holograms ... His image was everywhere,"<sup>30</sup> the academic Christophe Jaffrelot notes.

This saturation was achieved via numerous techniques that drew on a variety of media forms, including the radio, print, television and digital media. A hundred and thirty holographic shows were held over the course of the 2012 campaign. There was widespread circulation among the public of "Modi masks"—realistic rubber masks displaying Modi's face, which, as the anthropologist Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi observes, "made every photograph of a crowd gathering in his name a permanent visual advertisement for his face."<sup>31</sup> It also represented a way for the crowd to publicly identify with him, a quintessentially populist strategy. "Modi has sought

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<sup>28</sup> Zoya Hasan, p. 147

<sup>29</sup> P. Raman, "Modi's Attempted Image Makeover," *The Wire*, 29 September 2021, accessed at <https://thewire.in/politics/modis-attempted-image-makeover-after-the-covid-debacle-has-morphed-into-worrying-sycophancy>

<sup>30</sup> Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot, eds., *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India* (London, England: C Hurst, 2019), p. 1

<sup>31</sup> Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, "Reflections in the Crowd Delegation, Verisimilitude, and the Modi Mask," in *Majoritarian State* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 91

to establish a personal relationship with his supporters in such a way that they can identify with him, illustrating the mimetic dimension of Ostiguy's definition of populism," Jaffrelot remarks, drawing here on Pierre Ostiguy's reading of populist politics as an enacted performance and spectacle, in which the leader attempts to connect directly with, or even embody, the national audience.<sup>32</sup>

The extensive drive towards personalisation was as visible in the interim years of Modi's prime-ministership as it was in his second term (from 2019 onwards). For instance, 56 percent of the budget for a government initiative, *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*—"Save and educate the daughter"—was spent on ads that largely featured Modi.<sup>33</sup> A cricket stadium in the city of Ahmedabad was named after him, and, during the COVID-19 outbreak, vaccination certificates were issued with Modi's photograph on them. Publicity campaigns erupted in the lead-up to his birthday, in 2021.

Although image-making is a tool mobilized by every politician, historians have argued there is a personality cult surrounding Modi,<sup>34</sup> drawing on, among other things, his saturation of the public space; ministers speaking of him as divine; and the existence of popular slogans referring to him with religious overtones. While some contend this may be "the largest [cult] in human history"<sup>35</sup> it has also regularly invited comparison with the former prime minister Indira Gandhi of the Congress party (who was arguably India's first dictator). Like Modi, she was seen as synonymous with both her party and the nation itself, as echoed by a refrain made popular during her reign: "India is Indira and Indira is India."<sup>36</sup> She was also compared to a Hindu

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<sup>32</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, p. 47

<sup>33</sup> Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Keane, *To Kill A Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism* (London, England: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 118

<sup>34</sup> Ajay Gudavarthy, "The Return of the Personality Cult," *Himal Southasian*, last modified June 24, 2014, accessed June 14, 2023, <https://www.himalmag.com/return-personality-cult/>

<sup>35</sup> Video, accessed at <https://thewire.in/video/watch-modi-has-largest-personality-cult-in-human-history-india-now-a-3070-democracy>

<sup>36</sup> Pupul Jayakar, *Indira Gandhi: A Biography* (New Delhi, India: Penguin, 1992).

goddess, Durga, and her public appearances became regular “state spectacles.”<sup>37</sup> Studies of their styles of self-representation via the media have explored similarities, including an emphasis on the television, although some argue Gandhi’s rule was more notable for deploying the radio most to aid her specific style of populism, and place Modi, by contrast, firmly in the era of the television.

Modi’s acute awareness of the impact of the television was already visible during his chief-ministership of Gujarat in the 2000s, when he launched his own channel, leading scholars to argue that he seemed more attuned to the centrality and power of images than any other mode.<sup>38</sup> Television channels such as Republic TV have also echoed the Modi government’s narrative—a study of its primetime debates for three years revealed around 8 anti-BJP debates for every 100 anti-opposition debates, and consistent sycophancy towards Modi.<sup>39</sup> Yet, his tenure has also been concomitant with major advancements in other technologies, such as 3-D and social media, leading to claims that his style evolved into “cybernetic populism.”<sup>40</sup> Although one of Modi’s biographers credited his political appeal largely to the effect of his “performances on the stage,”<sup>41</sup> Amit Shah, the current minister of Home Affairs and former president of the BJP, has underscored the importance of social media “warriors” and Whatsapp over traditional forms of media in aiding the BJP’s win.<sup>42</sup> And, as far back as 2007, an editorial in *The Times of India* stated: “Modi is not just a man or chief minister, but an ‘event’ in Indian politics after Indira Gandhi to present that sole authoritative model of leadership. With a wider vision of brand building and systematic strategies of image positioning than Indira.”<sup>43</sup> Technological shifts and

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<sup>37</sup> Smriti Sawkar (2022) Champion of the Third World: Indira Gandhi and the spectacle of the 1983 NAM summit, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 60:4, 357-377

<sup>38</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, “Narendra Modi and the Power of Television in Gujarat,” *Television & new media* 16, no. 4 (2015): 346–353, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1527476415575499>, p. 1, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot and Vihang Jumle, “One Man Show: A study of 1,779 Republic TV debates reveals how the channel champions Narendra Modi,” *The Caravan*, 15 December 2020

<sup>40</sup> Jaffrelot, “Narendra Modi and the Power of Television in Gujarat,” p. 1

<sup>41</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, p. 49

<sup>42</sup> Nalin Mehta, *The New Bjp: The Remaking of the World’s Largest Political Party* (Westland, 2022), p. 222-223

<sup>43</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, p. 45

the explosion of new media as well as a new language of political marketing, then, evinces a contrast between these leaders' methods of persona projection.

It is worth pondering the place of print as a cultural mode for shaping modern political personas within this particular context. Cultural historians have, in any case, perennially offered challenges to the applicability of Benedict Anderson's formulation of the dynamic between print capitalism and nationalism, and Jurgen Habermas's emphasis on print in the creation of the public sphere in India, arguing that print was always relatively marginal given the high rates of illiteracy (as of the early 1990s the literacy rate was 65 percent, and it was 77.7 percent in 2022<sup>44</sup>) and that, therefore oral, visual and performative media, as well as mass protest, public gatherings, festivities and so on have been more salient in the formation of the nationalist imaginary.<sup>45</sup> The question of vernacular versus English is also relevant to consider: as Akshaya Mukul's expansive book on the Gita Press, which mass-produced and disseminated millions of affordable copies of Hindu epics and also ran a highly circulated magazine in the early twentieth century, has traced, print publishers *have* played a huge role in shaping Hindu nationalism.<sup>46</sup>

What, then, might the role of print look like in a milieu in which visual and digital methods appear to have acquired a seminal importance for leaders to engage with large swathes of the public in a persuasive way, and with print-media readership declining drastically? There is still an evident interest in book publishing, as well as the production and performances that go alongside it—from book launches to media coverage—when it comes to the building of political personalities in India. Several books about Modi, many in English, some authorised and some not, have emerged during his first and second terms. These include biopics (one was released

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<sup>44</sup> Kavita Roy, "Literacy Rate in India in 2022," *ACADEMICIA An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal* (2022).

<sup>45</sup> Raminder Kaur, *Performative Politics and the Cultures of Hinduism: Public Uses of Religion in Western India* (Delhi, India: Permanent Black, 2005)

<sup>46</sup> Akshaya Mukul, *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India* (New Delhi, India: HarperCollins, 2017).

during his election campaign in 2019), comic books, several hagiographic biographies and at least two that incorporated critique fairly early on into his first term. Late last year, an article noted the typology of “avatars” these publications promote: “organisational genius, foreign policy maven, social justice champion, moral exemplar.”<sup>47</sup>

What explains the motive behind these books, given that they can hardly be aiming for an enormous readership (English continues to be accessible primarily to the caste and class elite) and given there are more rapid forms of dissemination plausible today? One possible answer might be provided by the scholar Arvind Rajagopal’s argument against the dominant notion that older media is necessarily eclipsed by newer technology; he posits that “blind spaces exist new and old technologies of communication, which can themselves become important means of mediation. For example, rumour coexists alongside print and electronic media and may be used as a counterpoint to established channels of communication.”<sup>48</sup> The assumption of a firm hierarchy of relevance, so to speak, “ignores the fact that there is no necessary boundary between these media; each has an imagination of the other and responds to it.”<sup>49</sup>

Why biography?

Modi was once asked how he would like history to remember him, to which he responded that he did not aspire to be remembered by history books: “Modi was never born. He never intended to etch his name in history. I want people to remember me as just another person among the crores of Indians.”<sup>50</sup> *The Guardian* reported, in 2014 that Modi had, in fact, prevented regional

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<sup>47</sup> Unnati Sharma, “Legend, Creative Disruptor, Statesman’ — How an Entire Genre of Books Has Grown around PM Modi,” *Theprint*, last modified September 26, 2022, <https://theprint.in/india/legend-creative-disruptor-statesman-how-an-entire-genre-of-books-has-grown-around-pm-modi/1139860/>

<sup>48</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, ed., *The Indian Public Sphere: Readings in Media History* (Oxford, England: OUP, 2009), p. 13

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13

<sup>50</sup> Narendra Modi, “I Have No Aim to Be in History Books” (Youtube, April 18, 2018), last modified April 18, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRn\\_0Ra1gxQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRn_0Ra1gxQ).

governments from incorporating his biography into textbooks.<sup>51</sup> However, in June 2022, a school textbook for children in the first grade reportedly printed a paragraph stating: “The Prime Minister is like the monitor of the whole country. Narendra Damodardas Modi is the 14th and current Prime Minister of India. He was so brave in his childhood that once he caught a young crocodile and brought it home.”<sup>52</sup> While this could be conceived as pointing to how narratives are not necessarily always disseminated in a “top down” fashion—as historiographical work on leader “anecdotes” has shown, they might take on a discursive life of their own—some of these aggrandising stories were put into the public eye by Modi himself, as well as in biographical material and newspapers.

If we are to analyse such materials beyond the ballast they may lend towards a cult of personality, it may be possible to examine whether, and how, they correspond to broader national projects. What are their chosen textual and literary strategies, and how do aspects of language, anecdote, affect and narrative shape the representation of the leader and nation? How do the texts’ promotion, reception and public afterlives cement the place (however marginal) they occupy within the national story? And finally, how do they contribute to the formation of cultural memory at different periods?

Pointing to the personalisation of power in both Modi and Gandhi’s regimes, I carry out close critical readings of biographies and books based around their personas, and study the media landscape and political backdrop in which they were written, drawing as well on political history, persona studies and media theory, interviews with historians, and studies of life-writing around the world to formulate my response to larger questions about the phenomenon of biography. I

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<sup>51</sup> Jason Burke, “Narendra Modi Rejects Calls for His Biography to Appear in Textbooks,” *The Guardian* (The Guardian, May 30, 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/30/narednra-modi-rejects-calls-biography-textbooks>.

<sup>52</sup> Satya B, “How ‘Brave’ Modi Is.. Story Added In Textbooks,” *Gulte*, last modified June 20, 2022, accessed June 14, 2023, <https://www.gulte.com/political-news/176690/how-brave-modi-is-story-added-in-textbooks..>

argue that two books on Modi, written early into his first term by foreign journalists claiming objective distance, represent efforts to revitalise his political image at the cusp of his rise to national power, while two books from his second term burnish and celebrate his mythic status without even the pretence of criticality. I then turn to a biography of Indira Gandhi to examine how it mobilises epic to forge the history of both the leader and the country. Finally, I argue that shifts in the nature of mediation, such as the corporate branding of nations, impacts some of the constructions of political persona, embedding them within a hopeful future of the nation, while in other texts there is a leaning back to archaic myth to bolster the leader's primordial bond to the nation.

## Literature Review and Frameworks

### Biography: a history of the genre

The story of a life told by another—a simple enough description of biography exists, yet the genre’s fluidity means that it is frequently analogised to other acts, from quests and psychoanalysis to burglary, archeological excavations, gossip or detective work. Despite the exhaustive array of ways to represent what biography is and does, the conventions of the genre tend to demand the thorough examination of a life, usually from beginning to end.

The trajectory of the genre is often traced back, within Western historiography, to saints’ hagiographies or works recording the traits of exemplary public figures with a view to their moral purposes, such as Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, which carried traces of rhetorical forms of praise such as the panegyric or encomium.<sup>53</sup> The early Arabic biographical tradition, meanwhile, locates itself in the seventh century with writings on Prophet Muhammad such as the *al-Sira al-Nabawiya*, as well as biographical dictionaries dated from the ninth century onwards.<sup>54</sup>

The more contemporary form of the genre, geared towards convincingly presenting a person’s life story and what they were like, began developing in the seventeenth century—also the period when the term “biography” first came into parlance<sup>55</sup>—with the rising popularity of life writing

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<sup>53</sup> Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), Chapter 1

<sup>54</sup> Faustina Doufikar-Aerts, “Arabic Biography,”

physicians.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, 2010th ed. (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 14

and notions of individualism.<sup>56</sup> A flurry of lives of leaders or artists, were penned in France and Italy around the mid sixteenth century; Francis Bacon and, later, Samuel Johnson endorsed the genre, and, with further developments in print culture and the growth of literary circles, the subjects of these texts began varying and included collective biographies. Modernist work from the 1920s, including by Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, propelled the “New Biography”; the latter in particular advocated for a turn away from the reverential mode.

The professionalisation of history in Europe, such as in Germany with Leopold Von Ranke’s work, engendered new methodologies for the discipline that eschewed individuals and biography in favour of larger political developments. Marxist historians also rejected the focus on “great men,” turning to processes, social structures and transitions, although many Marxist historians acknowledged the popularity of the genre and wrote biographies in the twentieth century. Neither do these interactions with biography follow a linear or neat trajectory, as historians, including Marxists and those from the *Annales*, began rethinking the importance of biography in the early work produced within these very schools of thought.<sup>57</sup>

If biography in the nineteenth century still deemed certain arenas of life as off limits, changes in social mores altered what could be expected to be revealed of a life. Mass media engendered a further “ambivalent overlap between the ‘public sphere’ and the private life,”<sup>58</sup> which was furthered by technological developments, including social media and the rapid growth of celebrity culture. Biography has nonetheless seen a good deal of scepticism surrounding its legitimacy and veracity, particularly because of its emphasis on the role of the individual as opposed to wider social structures and processes. With the “new critics” in literary studies insisting on a separation of text from author, to post-structuralists arguing for the “death of the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>57</sup> Caine, p. 20

<sup>58</sup> Hermione Lee, Chapter 2

author” and issuing challenges to earlier accepted notions of a coherent, singular self, there was a consequential complication of what “the individual” comprised in the first place.<sup>59</sup> If theorists such as Roland Barthes proposed “biographemes,” or splintered micro-narratives as an alternative to biographical texts that try to impose causality and chronology,<sup>60</sup> Pierre Bourdieu collapsed the differences between autobiography and biography, speaking of both as acts of construction of events, and noting the “fallacy of coherence” in the chronological order that such texts try to impose.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, scholars have heralded a “biographical turn”<sup>62</sup> in the humanities and social sciences from at least the 1970s, with historians demonstrating an interest in reading personal narratives against wider sociopolitical developments. Autobiography in particular became crucial to the dissemination of narratives by marginalised groups, while the influence of microhistory, expounded by scholars like Carlo Ginzburg, brought in new ways of exploring how communities or even individuals, often previously overlooked in history-writing, could illuminate larger ideas about a period.

There is a visible tension between recent acknowledgements of the genre as crucial to historical work, and the continued ambivalence or downright wariness from scholars. Some scholars put this confusion down to the divide between the literary and the political biography. The latter, which had largely been dedicated to studying powerful male politicians as well as their origin stories, leadership style and public reputations, was not entirely overhauled by shifting disciplinary approaches. One possible cause, particularly relevant for this study of the enduring

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<sup>59</sup> Caine, p. 22

<sup>60</sup> David Österle, “A Life in Memory Fragments: Roland Barthes’s ‘Biographemes,’” in *Biography in Theory*, ed. Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 178–185.

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Biographical Illusion (1986),” in *Biography in Theory*, ed. Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 210–216.

<sup>62</sup> Caine, p. 10

popularity of Modi biographies, is “the appeal of heroic biography ... which is linked to the rise of popular (meaning nonacademic) history.”<sup>63</sup>

### Political biography and the nation

Political biography centred around a leader has remained in vogue, despite arguments characterising it as revisionist, subjective or trivial, and in spite of the expansion of the biographical form to include collectives. Sprawling biographies of politicians continued to stay as required reading in history courses and their implications for the discipline began to be reckoned with as well; for instance, the author of a biography of Adolf Hitler argued that biography can offer insights into historical figures’ motivation, even if it does not provide an in-depth understanding of long-term social transitions. This has meant that there has been almost a continuous heralding of an unprecedented interest in biography as a form.

This abiding popularity goes back to the interest in exemplary figures, which continued into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—although perhaps “the idea of an exemplary life has never gone away”<sup>64</sup>—when Thomas Carlyle declared that “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.”<sup>65</sup> The eighteenth century witnessed an emphasis on patriotic biographies, which further cemented over the following century, with scholars like Ernest Renan underscoring the importance of national biography as a precursor to “European state formation.”<sup>66</sup> By the 1880s, England and several European nations, including Germany, Italy and

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<sup>63</sup> Lucy Riall, “The Shallow End of History? The Substance and Future of Political Biography,” *The journal of interdisciplinary history* 40, no. 3 (2010): 375–397, p. 382

<sup>64</sup> Lee, Chapter 2

<sup>65</sup> Caitríona Ní Dhúill, “World History as Heroic Biography: Thomas Carlyle’s ‘Great Men,’” in *Biography in Theory*, ed. Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 30–34.

<sup>66</sup> Caine, 50

the Netherlands, had subscribed to the “heroic model of biography”<sup>67</sup> and published collections about the lives of important national figures. These, the scholar Barbara Caine asserts, “provide a major adjunct to nation-building and to the creation of a sense of a national past.”<sup>68</sup>

The genre, then, began reaching beyond its purported moral, religious, entertainment and educational functions, whether for an old nation reiterating its distinct values or a newly formed one forging a national history. In the case of Irish autobiography for instance, scholars have argued that nationalism was the main impetus behind the genre.<sup>69</sup> A study of political icons from South Africa, Ghana and Kenya underlines the intertwining of national and individual exemplary lives, with a nod to the “one-dimensional frames of heroes or villains through which African political figures’ biographies tend to be read.”<sup>70</sup> A writer notes that her father, John Victor Moráis, “wrote biographies of the Great Men of Malaya, and finally, his own memoirs, as part of his self-conscious role as an active participant in nation-building.”<sup>71</sup> The entanglement between the writing of lives and national histories, then, has played out across various countries, and India is no exception to this phenomenon, as the biographies we will discuss evince.

### India and the biographical tradition

Investigations into the workings of biography in India have often begun with the assumption that the genre was either not an indigenous one, in that there was no trace of it prior to the British, or that it is “underdeveloped.”<sup>72</sup> Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, in his autobiography,

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<sup>67</sup> Riall, p. 377

<sup>68</sup> Caine, p. 4 and 51

<sup>69</sup> Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (Heinemann Publishing, 2011), p. 10

<sup>70</sup> Anais Angelo, ed., *The Politics of Biography in Africa*, Routledge: 2022

<sup>71</sup> Dawn Morais, “Malaysia: The Writing of Lives and the Constructing of a Nation,” in *Biography* 33.1 (Winter 2010), p. 84

<sup>72</sup> Vijaya Ramaswamy and Yogesh Sharma, eds., *Biography as History: Indian Perspectives* (Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman, 2009).

declared it a “practice peculiar to the west,”<sup>73</sup> and historians have argued that although the late twentieth century has seen a spate of global biographical work, it “is not an art that flourishes in India despite the nation’s obsession with individuals.”<sup>74</sup> Some historians have tried to determine why, suggesting the predominance of Marxist and socialist approaches, a deference engendered by religious or cultural norms, and a consequent reluctance to focus on the individual or a reserved silence when dealing with controversial aspects of the subject’s life. Another suggestion that has been offered for biography not having really “taken off” in some senses is a comparative lack of public interest, that “the Indian public is undoubtedly less interested in disclosures of the private lives of its political public figures than, say, the British (in their royal family), or the American (in, say, the Kennedys).”<sup>75</sup> What is more likely, though, is that an interest in the personal life of politicians does exist, including for salacious reasons or as a tool for interpreting political action, but there is a visible tendency towards cordoning off the private from the public.

Contributors to an anthology that asks whether India has an indigenous tradition of biographical writing, many contributors argue that several texts deserve consideration, including the early seventh-century *Harshacharita*—an account, though heavily fictionalised, of King Harshavardhana of Kanauj; Mughal compilations of life stories of religious figures and hadith scholars; the memoirs of emperors, such as the *Babur Nama*; and fourteenth-century biographies of saints and other self-reflexive writing from the same period.<sup>76</sup> Eulogistic writing on colonial administrators that imitated previous imperial scholarship forms a strand of Indian biography as well, but it is with the writing of lives of those involved in various political movements in the twentieth century that a markedly clear turn to publishing life writing is visible. This includes the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *The Book Review*, Volume 24, University of Virginia: 2001, p. 4

<sup>75</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism. London and New York: Routledge, 1993,” *Oxford literary review* 16, no. 1 (1994): 273–285, p. 109

<sup>76</sup> Ramaswamy, *Biography as History*

memoirs of Communist women—by no means a homogenous group, with immense disparities across urban-rural, caste and class boundaries—in Telangana and Bengal, the author of the Constitution BR Ambedkar’s short autobiography *Waiting for a Visa* (1935-6) exploring caste bias, as well as writing about, or by, other forerunners of the anti-colonial movement, from biographies of MK Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru presenting them as ‘fathers of the nation’ to the popular autobiographies of both these figures.

Here it is important to consider divergences in the trajectories of autobiography and biography, although “life writing” an umbrella category does attempt to amalgamate the two forms.<sup>77</sup> If autobiography creates and enacts an identity, biography is meant to characterise and represent this identity (yet, biographies can also be actively performative, and as discussed, the rigid distinctions between them have been contested.) As elsewhere, autobiography was galvanised in India for telling the life stories of oppressed castes, Muslims and other minorities; Dalit life-writing in particular constituted a vast, body of work, functioning both as a method of political organisation and a tool for the articulation of dissent, oppression and claiming rights. Although certainly not as hyper-visible or popular a mode as autobiography has become, there is a continued emphasis in India on the “heroic” biography, focussing on (and often aggrandising) a figure in a position of leadership and power, or celebrity, as evident in the slew of biographies of Indira Gandhi, as well as several contemporary ones on Modi currently being churned out, at least 25 of which have been published over the last decade.

Historians have tended to treat these texts with scepticism and as further evidence of the lack of “real” biographical pursuits in the nation (noting sardonically, for instance, that a biography of Indira Gandhi was dedicated to none other than Indira Gandhi<sup>78</sup>), but they warrant consideration

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<sup>77</sup> Tom Brown and Belén Vidal ed., *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, Routledge: 2014, p. 10

<sup>78</sup> Ramachandra Guha, “Lives in Need of Authors,” *Himal Southasian*, last modified October 1, 2002, <https://www.himalmag.com/lives-in-need-of-authors/>.

as cultural works produced about political figures in power. They may not match up to the generic standards of critical biography—in leader biographies, a frequent lack of distance and tendency towards sycophancy is often displayed, for instance, as is a disregard of formal convention—but I argue that the fact that they intend to be and market themselves as biographies (whether or not they devolve into hagiographies) is significant.

On the immense scale of Indian publishing, the thirty odd texts on Modi and Indira Gandhi, respectively, can hardly be sufficient to signal a tradition, as scholars have done for a range of figures, from Benito Mussolini (Luisa Passerini apparently noted around seven hundred books that deal with his leadership<sup>79</sup>) to campaign memoir by American politicians. Yet, the interest in the lives of political figures, and continued choice of the mode for constructing a political persona demonstrates, though on a micro level, the “biographisation of national identity through the body and life of a national hero/leader.”<sup>80</sup>

#### Analysing Political Biography: frameworks and questions

It is worth considering the kinds of political biographies published today. One trend, which some have put down to the rise of populism on the right, demonstrates the increasing number of books that amalgamate several political figures, often strongmen or authoritarians (or both) and attempt to pinpoint patterns and similarities in their style of leadership. Vijay Prashad’s *Strongmen: Trump, Modi, Erdoğan, Putin, Duterte, Putin* (2018) and Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (2020) follow this approach. In this thesis I have chosen to focus on works produced about singular political leaders rather than collective biographies, in order to examine in-depth the fashioning of narratives that go in line with the personalisation of power.

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Lumley, “Luisa Passerini, Mussolini Immaginario, Laterza, Bari, 1991, 290 Pp., ISBN 88-420-3738-9, 45,000 Lire,” *Modern Italy: journal of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy* 1, no. 1 (1995): 136–138,

<sup>80</sup> Sidonie Smith, “Autobiographical Discourse in the Theaters of Politics,” *Biography* 33, no. 1 (2010), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/bio.0.0149>.

I turn here to two instances that illustrate some fundamental questions about the construction of political biography. In her 2023 book, Chris Wallace, an Australian academic, recalls returning an advance and spiking her biography of Julia Gillard, who had become the first Australian woman prime minister and leader of the Labor Party. Wallace recalls intense anticipation around the biography, an imminent media storm with journalists “poised to cherrypick my biography for exploitable stories,” and her recognition that the biography could be severely damaging to an already precarious government.<sup>81</sup> Conducting an in-depth inquiry into the motivations of prime-ministerial biographies in Australia, she poses questions about the possible motivations of biographer and subject, the immediate effect of the work, its influence (deliberate or inadvertent) on a political trajectory, and whether it was undertaken “as political intervention.”<sup>82</sup> This is a salient question for biographers of both Modi and Gandhi; while I argue that some books do self-consciously pose as intervention, the obsequious nature of others reflects a prevailing political mood, and still others claim to focus entirely on the personal rather than the political.

The second example relates to Finnish politics, and to a text that *did* see itself through to publication. The autobiography of Ahti Karjalainen, the former Finnish prime minister, was printed in 1989, and written in collaboration with a political historian. Karjalainen declared that he would “sign [off on] everything,” since the book was definitely his own story.<sup>83</sup> The scholar Matti Hyvärinen explains that the book had a massive political impact, in part because it revealed controversial information about a former foreign minister’s negotiations with a Soviet diplomat. Despite the flattering self-representation in the book, and the subject-author claiming control

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<sup>81</sup> Chris Wallace, *Political Lives: Australian Prime Ministers and Their Biographers* (Sydney, NSW, Australia: NewSouth Publishing, 2023), p. XI

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XIII

<sup>83</sup> Matti Hyvärinen, “Narrative Analysis and Political Autobiography,” *Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Article 5, p. 52

over the narrative, the results were unexpected. After a public furore, the historian became the “hero-narrator who reveals the secrets of the president’s power system,” Karjaleinan became a “national anti-hero,” and, paradoxically, the minister about whom the text revealed damning details, became more popular.<sup>84</sup>

Apart from the unpredictable impact of a political biography, however, this example raises questions about the processes of writing, interviewing and signing off on a text. If these are all acknowledged as acts contingent on several things, including the nature of questions, the political scenario, and the dynamic between the subject and author, then simply “signing [off] cannot deliver the endangered coherence of the narrating subject. The result is somewhere between biography and autobiography, but no one knows exactly where.”<sup>85</sup> This ambiguity is something that one of Narendra Modi’s complimentary biographies acknowledges in the acknowledgements section, when the author writes that it “began as interviews but ended as something quite different thanks to the open and tolerant manner in which Modi bore my probing questioning.”<sup>86</sup> What this difference constitutes is left open-ended here, but it is safe to assume that the dynamic with the subject has implications for the sculpting of the biography—as is also evident from a once-enamoured journalist, who, feeling abruptly rejected by Indira Gandhi, did not alter the flattering biography but added some vicious details.

These instances expand the conventional role of the political biographer, posing them not as a neutral mirror to the subject involved, but as an actor with agency, motivation and the capacity to image-make but also image-break,<sup>87</sup> and the text itself as one with both a plausible immediate effect and a longer aftermath. Questioning the veneer of authenticity demands a consideration of how selectivity, style, rhetoric, self-consciousness and the structure of narrative combine to

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 57

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 58

<sup>86</sup> Andy Marino, *Narendra Modi: A Political Biography* (New Delhi, India: HarperCollins, 2014), p. 184

<sup>87</sup> Wallace, p. XIII

structure the narrative voice in the first place. These are the parameters I intend to question in the chapter that follows, as I examine biographies of Modi in his first term.

## Chapter 1

### Modi Biographies – The First Term

On the cusp of, and then soon into his first term while the image-making apparatus, outlined in the previous chapter, was being heavily galvanised, Modi granted foreign journalists Andy Marino and Lance Price interview access. These were relatively obscure figures without an ostensible connection to Indian politics, who wrote adulatory books, in 2014 and 2015 respectively, praising Modi's political rise, ameliorating his role in the Gujarat riots and avoiding criticism of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, of which Modi was a part.

Although the Indian journalist Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay had published a somewhat critical biography in 2013, and had interviewed Modi for it, certain areas, such as the Gujarat riots, were categorically off limits.<sup>88</sup> Marino (who frequently cites another 2013 Indian-authored biography as well as Mukhopadhyay's), in contrast, described the politician's complete openness to him: "Modi spoke with candour, without notes. Nothing, in terms of questions, was taboo."<sup>89</sup> He also presented his biography as the most legitimate, premised on it being "possibly the first time he [Narendra Modi] has granted such access to any journalist or author, Indian or foreign."<sup>90</sup> Price

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<sup>88</sup> Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man, the Times* (New Delhi, India: Tranquebar Press, 2013).

<sup>89</sup> Andy Marino, p. 5

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

also claimed the same—unprecedented access—in his book deconstructing Modi’s electoral victory. He later admitted to having been approached by one of the prime minister’s associates to write the book, that he did not know of Modi before-hand and that he was also provided some financial support for it.<sup>91</sup>

These books, whose authors were remarked on by the press as puzzling choices for authorised books, are clearly aimed at a Western audience. They represent an effort to carefully curate and revitalise Modi’s image, at a critical political juncture, when his international image was still tentative and shadowed by the Gujarat violence. Marino demonstrates an elision of critical aspects of Indian political history in his refusal to engage with the roots of the RSS (which would be inconvenient to project of rescuing of Modi’s legacy post Godhra), his valorisation of Modi’s childhood and unquestioning regurgitation of Modi’s narrative, including presenting him as apolitical. Price, though warier, focusses instead on validating his endorsement of development and visions for the future. Both books serve to distance Modi from the virulence of Hindu nationalism, redirecting attention instead to the hope his election represents for the nation and representing his rule as one that will see a deft and idealised synthesis of modernity and tradition.

### 1.1 Andy Marino’s *Narendra Modi: A Political Biography* (2013)

“For British Biographer, Modi Was Only a Phone Call Away,” read the headline of a *New York Times* article published during the Indian general elections, in April 2014. It marvelled at the fact that Andy Marino had managed to get Modi to sit down for an interview, despite journalists and

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<sup>91</sup> Francis Elliott, “Spin doctor was paid for India book,” *The Times*, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/spin-doctor-was-paid-for-india-book-wvbdhvqwfmg>

activists having claimed that Modi had been less than forthcoming, in their experience.<sup>92</sup> Others were to wonder how this “mystery biographer,” a London-based writer with “no known prior connection” to India, was granted access.<sup>93</sup>

Marino made a few intriguing assertions. He estimated that Modi had opened up to him because he was “a biographer, not a journalist,” a foreigner and, consequently, “not involved,” and, finally, that he “was talking about things that he [Modi] was interested in.”<sup>94</sup> He was confident, too, that if Modi became the prime minister, those who had criticised him would come around to Marino’s viewpoint.<sup>95</sup> This conviction suggests its author was self-conscious about its role (and the benefit of biography, rather than journalism) as an intervention.

In the book, Marino reiterates his inherent advantage in being a foreigner, writing that “an outsider’s perspective can shed clarity on events that those too close to them, out of passion or prejudice, might miss.”<sup>96</sup> Not “being swayed by a particular ideology or point of view,”<sup>97</sup> he argues, allows him to write with “cold objectivity.”<sup>98</sup> Yet, as his close reading of the narrative elements demonstrates, the self-assured declaration of cold objectivity is as fallacious as the notion that this authorised biographer’s work is an independent, individual assessment rather than a collaborative construction.

The early chapters of Marino’s book demonstrate the text’s proclivities in constructing Modi’s persona. Following the introduction’s generic first line—“This is the story of an extraordinary

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<sup>92</sup> Betwa Sharma, “For British Biographer, Modi Was Only a Phone Call Away,” <https://archive.nytimes.com/india.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/22/for-british-biographer-modi-was-only-a-phone-call-away/>

<sup>93</sup> Amy Kazmin, “India elections: Narendra Modi’s mystery biographer,” <https://www.ft.com/content/2f77f73a-4803-3345-b5fc-d97c596ec726>

<sup>94</sup> Andy Marino, p. 5

<sup>95</sup> Ibid

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

life”<sup>99</sup>—a staple of the ethos of the supposedly moribund Great Man biography—the book quickly establishes the pressing context of Modi being the prime-ministerial candidate in a “historic” election.”<sup>100</sup> It sets the parameter for this moment by invoking the era of Indira Gandhi as the last time so much political change hinged around an election.

The text then branches off into a description of character attributes, though these shy away from being definitive: Modi has a “compelling nature,” and struck the author as being “both a complex and simple man, but within a multilayered persona.”<sup>101</sup> The generic ambivalence of this statement is echoed elsewhere in the text, when, for instance, Marino notes Modi’s “reverence for tradition but also his selective rejection of it”<sup>102</sup>; that he “gave an impression of both relaxation and strength”<sup>103</sup>; that he “could, like all children, be both obstinate and mischievous”<sup>104</sup>; that “as always, Modi was looking two ways, both forward and back”;<sup>105</sup> and that “the calm that characterizes his private personality is diametrically opposed to his robust, even raucous, public persona.”<sup>106</sup> This lack of specificity, and the tendency to balance a behavioural trait with its antithesis may appear as shallow, prosaic writing, or prevarication at worst.

Yet, this language develops aspects of the politician’s character in specific ways: for one, it universalises him as a stock character, a reassuring Everyman figure from his very beginnings, bolstering Marino’s descriptions of how his subject was exceedingly ordinary while growing up: “Narendra was unremarkably normal.”<sup>107</sup> He acknowledges Modi’s testimony in this regard: “‘everyone likes their childhood and I was also like that,’ he says.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> Andy Marino, p.5

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p. 23

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p.9

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 14

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p. 107

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p. 58

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 15

Elsewhere, the author uses his amassed collection of antithetical characteristics to justify a vague determinism on his part, as well as a preconceived notion of his subject's inherent benevolence and virtue: "There is often talk of Modi's egotism, roughness and arrogance alienating people; but evidence suggests, even if this was so, countervailing qualities counted for a lot too, or Modi would never have been given so much responsibility so early."<sup>109</sup> The diametrically opposed qualities also add ballast to a reading of Modi that echoes precisely his own self-presentation as an innovator always "looking two ways, both forward and back"<sup>110</sup>—Marino constructs him as poised to combine modernity and tradition, myth and technology, and his political programme as one that will "rejuvenate and make relevant to modern India its vast backwater of Hindu culture... in a modern, liberal context."<sup>111</sup>

The first chapter, "The Early Years," lays out various details about his childhood in Vadnagar, his family being poor and from the Ghanchi caste, as well notes about his upbringing and parents. A tendency to characterise him as exceptionally different becomes visible at this juncture of the book. At the start of the second chapter Marino writes, for example, that Modi had "an unusual personality"<sup>112</sup> and was "a boy who constantly searched for answers outside conventional frameworks"<sup>113</sup> and "already an unusual young man."<sup>114</sup> This emphasis on uniqueness materialises in arbitrary rhetorical questions posed to the reader—"Did his strength – of both body and mind – make Narendra feel older than he was?"<sup>115</sup>—as well as the author's observations of the politician in action today: "an exceptional orator"<sup>116</sup> whose "cadence and

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<sup>109</sup> Marino, p. 33

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, p. 107

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 107

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 15

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 15

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p. 114

tonality is quite unique – rarely seen in India or indeed even in the West.”<sup>117</sup> Here, too, he draws on Modi’s recollections to provide the origin story for this uniqueness: “What Modi remembers is that as a child he always had ideas about how to do things – chores, tasks, games, lessons – differently, more efficiently, and that from his earliest years this provoked comment and sometimes opposition.”<sup>118</sup>

Marino equates this instinct for efficient approaches, with the potential to alter the world. This line of thought begins as yet another rhetorical question—“Was childhood important to him, or was he slightly bored by it and indifferent to play, wanting instead to know and do more than was expected of a child? When asked about it, Modi is non-committal.”<sup>119</sup> But, four pages later, and despite the politician’s apparent reticence on the matter, Marino suggests that certain essential traits and views meant Modi did, in fact, rapidly outgrow his childhood: “Narendra’s enthusiasm for changing and improving things, his need to align the world to the way he saw things, gives additional weight to the idea that childhood was somewhat constricting for him ... Modi today nods in agreement at this conclusion. ‘Innovation, new ideas, that was basically my temperament.’ He smiles.”<sup>120</sup>

From this arrival at an immensely self-serving portrayal, and the performativity of the back-and-forth, with Marino describing Modi’s approval, it is evident that Modi’s persona is being carved through a developing rapport between the author and the politician. Words like “innovation,” “new ideas,” “efficiency” are hollow, utilitarian phrases with which to depict a child, which would be at home within the hackneyed tropes of political marketing. They are evidently the result of an already considered decision about how to present Modi in the public realm as ever-primed for leadership.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 9

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>119</sup> Marino, p. 15

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 19

The amalgamation of exceptional and ordinary tropes evokes, as well, Ostiguy's observation of populist self-representation in staged performances, which establish the leader as both "one of us" and a heroic "ego ideal."<sup>121</sup> In another instance, Modi's innate normalcy is underscored, but here it functions as a foil to underscoring the public view on Modi as, ultimately, exceptional:

Sometimes the stories take on the hue of legend: it is well chronicled, for example, that Narendra liked to swim in nearby Sharmishtha Lake, and that in this lake lurked crocodiles. An early story relating to Narendra and the lake recounts that there was an ancient shrine – in later versions a beautiful temple – on a rocky outcrop not too far from the shore. On certain holy occasions the small flag atop this shrine would be changed. One such day, after heavy rain had agitated the crocodiles, the flag did need changing. Despite being advised against it, Narendra and two friends, Mahendra and Bachu, swam to the outcrop and back again. In later retellings the outcrop would become a distant island and Narendra would swim alone. Meanwhile, people on the shoreline beat convenient drums to scare off the reptiles (or more likely draw them away from where the boys swam). Narendra returned safely, having changed the flag, and the crowd, by now grandly swollen, cheered loudly: all present agreed that such actions befitted a future leader, or words to that effect. Today, at sixty-three, Modi shrugs at these stories of over half a century ago. Eyes twinkling, he simply says that his childhood was normal.<sup>122</sup>

Marino's acknowledgement of the story containing a "hue of legend," his reference to the presence of "convenient drums," the distinction drawn between its "early" and "later versions,"

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<sup>121</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, p. 32 and p. 69

<sup>122</sup> Andy Marino, p. 14

and the shift to a solitary Modi in “later retellings” confirm that in this particular instance he is aware of the hyperbolic and likely apocryphal<sup>123</sup> quality of the story. This tinge of scepticism is somewhat undercut by the phrase “all present agreed that such actions befitted a future leader,” which points to a prior consensus that he represented the quintessential traits of a leader. More disingenuous is that this reiteration of him as a patriotic “legend” culminates in his “twinkling” eyes and pithily professed humility. This implies, again, a rapport between the author and his subject, emphasising their performed roles as reticent, modest subject (elsewhere, as well, Marino notes that an anecdote of Modi’s, about his knack for innovation, is “in a sense bereft of ego”<sup>124</sup>) and biographer reciting fable-like stories, even while aware of their dubious veracity.

“Well-chronicled” suggests a robust storytelling tradition exists around the politician, but it does not point to the manner in which feats of bravery involving crocodiles have been consistently, and entirely uncritically, mobilised in the myth-making around him, having also been brought back into public discourse by the politician himself during a session with the British adventurer Bear Grylls.<sup>125</sup> Much before Marino was writing his book, they were utilised, for instance, by one of the country’s most-read newspapers: *The Times of India* featured articles on the front page on three consecutive days during the 2007 election campaign, relating how Modi enjoyed swimming in a lake with crocodiles during his childhood and brought a crocodile home.<sup>126</sup> The story was heavily championed during the 2014 elections too—once again in *The Times of India*, which quotes a childhood friend of Modi’s recalling that an astrologer had predicted he would become either a “revered saint” or a “big political leader,” and another drawing on the crocodile story to

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p 34

<sup>124</sup> Andy Marino, p. 45

<sup>125</sup> E. T. V. Bharat, “So Brave, caught a Crocodile PM Modis Adventurous Childhood Makes It to Class 1 Book,” *ETV Bharat*, last modified June 18, 2022, <https://www.etvbharat.com/english/bharat/pm-narendra-modi-crocodile-story-in-school-book/na20220618221823297297817>.

<sup>126</sup> *The Times of India* (Ahmedabad edition.), 24, 25, 26 November 2007; R. Sharma, “Young Modi Wanted Crocodile as a Pet,” *Times of India*, November 24, 2007, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2566261.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2566261.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

conclude that “such passion for adventure and risk-taking are qualities that India’s PM needs.”<sup>127</sup>

The report uses this to conclude that “Modi’s childhood friends are certain that he was destined to make history.” The crocodile exploit made it to other biographies,<sup>128</sup> even becoming the centre piece of a comic biography narrating Modi’s childhood exploits published in 2014.

Perhaps the reason that Marino does not acknowledge the nature of the myth-making in more expansive detail is that he tries to convey the existence of—and then negate—critical public opinion of Modi. He raises the idea that Modi has been subjected to “longest, most intense – and probably the most vituperative – campaign of vilification since the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat,”<sup>129</sup> holding the media and his political opponents responsible. He is very vague about who precisely is behind it, using the word “critics” in relation to things people have said about Modi 23 times, 18 of which are without references. Marino’s quote from Modi depicts him as an isolated victim of a media onslaught: “In India, without the help of the media, it is very difficult for a politician to live; I am only a exceptional case,’ Modi says today.”<sup>130</sup>

While the English-language media, especially, was very critical of Modi after the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, there was also a palpable shift in this regard. In line with his altered pro-development image, from 2003 onwards, Modi ensured the reworking of industrial policy and concessions for big business; the relaxation of certain labour and environmental regulations, making land acquisition easier for industries; the setting up of Vibrant Gujarat, a biannual event appealing to investors; and the start of a campaign to make Gujarat the world’s most attractive investment destination. Media outlets refocussed, following Modi’s shift to development as the mainstay of

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<sup>127</sup> Bharat Yagnik, “Called ‘Rajneta’ as a Boy, Narendra Modi Lived up to It,” *Times Of India*, last modified April 9, 2014, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/called-rajneta-as-a-boy-narendra-modi-lived-up-to-it/articleshow/33472836.cms>.

<sup>128</sup> Indo-Asian News Service, “When a Crocodile Attacked Narendra Modi,” *Ndtv.com* (NDTV, n.d.), <https://www.ndtv.com/elections-news/when-a-crocodile-attacked-narendra-modi-560825>.

<sup>129</sup> Andy Marino, p. 5; the word “vilification” features on p. 58, p. 80, p. 148, 149 as well

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p. 148

his political programme, conveying approval through panel discussions and ads. Arguably since 2009, Modi had “been systematically cultivating a relationship with the corporate media and had built a close partnership with them.”<sup>131</sup> A significant amount of attention was also dedicated to furthering a muscular, masculine image of Modi, with an emphasis on his “56-inch chest,” in sharp juxtaposition to a weaker, “impotent” Manmohan Singh of the Congress, the incumbent prime minister.<sup>132</sup> (This is also one of the myths Mukhopadhyay corrects in his biography: “the most widely mentioned physical attribute of Modi — his chest size — is not correct. Fifty-six inches is actually a very cleverly crafted tool to develop Modi’s alpha male image.”<sup>133</sup>)

During the run-up to the 2014 elections, as Suddhir Patnaik notes, “It was the media which enlarged the scope and space for Modi, generating wider acceptability as the future prime minister among the party cadre, sympathizers, and the common people at large.”<sup>134</sup> And, if the galvanising of media were not enough, Modi also reached well beyond legacy media, having started his own channels, such as *Vande Gujarat* in 2007 and *NaMo* in 2012, to directly access the public, and making use of radio, SMS, email, social media (which he was way ahead of his opponents in using, joining Twitter and Facebook in 2009), and more. Although Marino astutely recognises how the media “with honourable exceptions – genuflected in front of Indira’s regime,”<sup>135</sup> he does not exhibit the same judiciousness when it comes to discerning Modi’s relationship with the media.

Another key aspect of elision in Marino’s text is visible when it comes to the RSS, which he introduces after describing a wistful, latent patriotism and sense of virtue in his subject:

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<sup>131</sup> Pattnaik, “Media, Corporates, and Democracy”, p. 274

<sup>132</sup> Sanjay Srivastava writes: “The deployment of “traditional” masculinity politics as a significant electoral strategy was as unprecedented as the role of the media during the elections. ... that though couched in the language of “traditional”—and corporeal—manhood, Modi-masculinity is a recension in a time of consumerist modernity, and I further suggest that media has played a significant role in this re-fashioning.

<sup>133</sup> Mukhopadhyay, *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times*

<sup>134</sup> Pattnaik, “Media, Corporates, and Democracy,” p. 275

<sup>135</sup> Marino, p. 36

Did this idea of the self, held back a little by childhood, instil an interest in history, politics, a sense of the world – and so also patriotism, a respect for the past and by implication his elders whom he wished to join? ... In conjunction with his thoughtfulness and wide reading, such an evolving identity may easily awaken a feeling of duty and belonging in the widest sense. Thus Narendra was only eight years old when he began to attend the local shakha of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh.”<sup>136</sup>

However, just as immediately as he introduces the organisation, without any further elaboration, there is a digression to another string of rhetorical questions, but this time, they are less formulaic. He begins by asking how Modi may have “grown up and flourished had he been a Bihari or a Bengali, for example,” rather than Gujarati,<sup>137</sup> and then follows this whimsical query up with a potted history of Gujarat, which is juxtaposed against the political mores of Bengal. He then compares the latter to France. His attempts at drawing international parallels are clumsy here—as elsewhere in the text, such as when he declares that “India will never be a calm, cool, ordered nation like Switzerland or Sweden or Canada, and in temperament is more akin to the US.”<sup>138</sup> (A footnote in the book suggests that his misguided geographical parallels may even have created inaccuracies, since he claims to have used the term “Left” to refer to the Congress Party because he was using it “in its British sense,”<sup>139</sup> even though that would refer to a different set of political affiliations in India.)

He then toys with a different origin story for Modi, one in which he was Bengali, but, significantly, a fatalistic one, in which he is still a figure that signals virtue or is a larger-than-life personality:

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<sup>136</sup> Marino, 16

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p. 16

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p. 154

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p. 157

What if Narendra Modi had been born in Kolkata? With his feeling of difference, his solitariness and his interest in reading, perhaps he would not have felt himself so different to the spirit of the city. He might therefore have fitted in better. Might Narendra early on have transfused the cinema of Satyajit Ray into his bloodstream and become a radical film-maker, or a photographer like Sunil Janah (Modi is also a wanderer, and he does like cameras)? Is it improbable, given his rugged individuality, that he would have sought the orthodoxies of the Communist Party of India? Could he have fallen for Tagore instead of Vivekananda and even now be a disciple living simply at Shantiniketan? ... Would Modi now be challenging for the prime ministership had he not been suffused by the same environment that created Mahatma Gandhi ...

Though he alludes to the “danger in pondering these imponderables,”<sup>140</sup> he concludes that it is crucial to understand clues for future behaviour, particularly for a leader about to “govern the destinies of over a billion people.”<sup>141</sup> Marino returns to speculation later too: “There may well have been a rewarding career awaiting Narendra in the army.”<sup>142</sup> Marino’s dreamt up alternate universe illustrates a key question about the functions of national biography, as raised by the scholar Marita Sturken: “At what point does a biography become a national story, symbolizing an aspect of the nation’s self-image, its longing, and its fantasy?”<sup>143</sup> In this instance, Marino brings up several renowned and controversial Indian public figures, who are seen as having shaped the political and cultural history of India; by retroactively consigning Modi to a parallel life that is also necessarily embroiled within the national story—even the throwaway line prophesying an illustrious career in the army implies furthering a patriotic cause—Marino fuses his figure

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<sup>140</sup> Marino, p. 17

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p. 17

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>143</sup> Marita Sturken, “Personal Stories and National Meanings: Memory, Reenactment and the Image” in *Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff, eds., The Seductions of Biography* (Routledge, 2016).

inextricably with the nation's self-image. (This appears as well to miss the irony of invoking MK Gandhi during an abrupt and tangential break from introducing the RSS, given that a member of the organisation had assassinated him. If this is not, in fact, an oversight, and a deliberate inclusion, then it compounds Marino's dissimulation over the RSS, which is already visible by the act of this digression.)

When Marino does return to the RSS—it is important to note that this is the second mention so far—he first divorces it from politics, stating that Modi's attraction to it was “obviously not political in the sense of hewing to a particular ideological position”<sup>144</sup> and that the part of the RSS that Modi would have attended at the time “is best described as a sort of Boys Scouts group.”<sup>145</sup> This disclaimer before any comprehensive overview of the RSS has the effect of painting it, as one review pointed out, as “a sweet, cuddly sort of organisation, albeit a trifle eccentric, but generally benign and munificent.”<sup>146</sup> Marino then acknowledges the organisation is “right-wing, nationalistic and ideological,” and that it was banned because after MK Gandhi's assassination by a former member, but quickly averts the broader implications of this by balancing it immediately, with the phrase “yet it was also commended for averting a coup against Nehru.”<sup>147</sup> He then states the RSS began “acquiring quiet respectability as a disciplined force” and moves on to Modi's early “idol,” and mentor within the organisation, then to Modi's years of “nomadic wandering,”<sup>148</sup> before covering Indira Gandhi's highly repressive regime at length, and critically.

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<sup>144</sup> Marino, p. 19

<sup>145</sup> Ibid

<sup>146</sup> Ranjona Banerji, “Missing the Man: A Political Biography of Narendra Modi,” *The Hindustan Times* (Hindustan Times, May 10, 2014), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/missing-the-man-a-political-biography-of-narendra-modi/story-ITVAXDwE6WQxC64XZzgFwK.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Marino, p. 19

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p. 23

There is no mention, at any point in the book, of KB Hedgewar (even though the organisation's headquarters, named after him, crops up several times) or MS Golwalkar, the RSS's founder and its second chief and foremost ideologue, respectively. This elision is significant—for one, Modi himself had exalted both figures in biography, in a 2008 tribute to individuals from the RSS who had influenced him.<sup>149</sup> In this book of profiles, the longest chapter was on Golwalkar, whom he compares to the Buddha, a warrior-king and other beacons of eminence. Besides Modi's, he has been the subject of hagiographies from within and outside the Sangh. Nor does Marino ever mention another figure to whom Modi regularly pays tribute: VD Savarkar, the ideologue who first theorised Hindutva, and coined the term, and whose intellectual thought fundamentally influenced the RSS.

It is worth considering the centrality of these figures to Hindu nationalism, given that Marino's subject rose ranks within the RSS. Key moments in the genesis of Hindu nationalism were the creation, in 1915, of the All India Hindu Sabha. An organisation to represent the Hindu population, it was rekindled in the 1920s as the Hindu Mahasabha, in response to a wave of Muslim mobilisation during the Khilafat movement. It brought together several Hindu groups, including senior Congress Party members. Savarkar, who later headed it in the 1930s after it split from the Congress, had professed the need for a Hindu Rashtra, or Hindu nation, much before this. In 1923, he wrote *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, the first articulation to synonymise the nation with Hinduism.<sup>150</sup> As a self-described atheist, he categorised religion as only one aspect of Hindu identity, the others being territory, race and language;<sup>151</sup> he viewed Hindus, rather than being those who practise the faith, as the descendants of “ancestral sons of the soil,” and “the true

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<sup>149</sup> Narendra Modi, *Jyotipunj* (Prabhat Prakashan, 2015).

<sup>150</sup> Tanika Sarkar, “How the Sangh Parivar Writes and Teaches History,” in *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, p. 154: “Savarkar made Hindu and Indian synonymous, to reserve the nation for Hindus alone.”

<sup>151</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, p. 15

autochthons and owners of the land.”<sup>152</sup> In his view, only people who viewed India as both a holy land and fatherland could be real patriots, and consequently excluded Muslims from this category. Minorities from other religions therefore figured as outsiders, who could privately practise their faith but, in public, must “pay allegiance to Hindu symbols.”<sup>153</sup>

With the Hindu Mahasabha entrenched in the political realm, the RSS was imagined as a social movement. The idea for it had been brewing for some time, but it was officially established in 1925—in the aftermath of a spate of communal riots—by Hedgewar, who was deeply influenced by Savarkar’s concept of Hindutva and categorisation of Muslims who believed in their faith as inherent outsiders. The influence of European nationalism on members of the Sangh was clear too. BS Moonje, Hedgewar’s mentor and a leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, met with Benito Mussolini in 1931, and the RSS drew many practices from Fascism. (Hedgewar, who perceived Muslims as a fundamental existential threat to Hindus, is said to have referred to the community as “*yavana* [a Hindi word for Greeks, signalling their status as foreigners] snakes” and “anti-national.”<sup>154</sup>) A pronounced appreciation for Nazism and Fascism can be found in the book *We, or our Nationhood Defined* (1938), where Golwalkar invokes parallels between the project for a Hindu Rashtra and what had transpired in the Third Reich<sup>155</sup>:

To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the semitic races—the Jews ... Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a

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<sup>152</sup> Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, “Introduction,” *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, p.3

<sup>153</sup> Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, p. 15

<sup>154</sup> Tanika Sarkar, “How the Sangh Parivar Writes and Teaches History,” in *Majoritarian State*, p. 159

<sup>155</sup> MS Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, 1939, Reprint, Nagpur, India: Bharat Prakashan, 1947. In the same text, Golwalkar also expresses admiration for Italian Fascism: “Look at Italy, the old Roman Race consciousness of conquering the whole territory round the Mediterranean Sea, so long dormant, has roused itself, and shaped the Racial-National aspirations accordingly.”

good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by. ... the foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, ie of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment not even citizen's rights.<sup>156</sup>

The Sangh attempted to distance itself from several of Golwalkar's views after Gandhi's assassination, as well as claiming no relationship—and then a terminated relationship—with Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse.<sup>157</sup>

It is deeply misleading, then, that without so much as a nod to these figures or discussing the roots of the RSS, Marino concludes that the organisation shifted from being “eccentric” (a word he uses elsewhere as well for a Hindu-nationalist campaign<sup>158</sup>) to a “defender of democracy”<sup>159</sup>; and he is clearly aware of this history since he writes that “most of its workers were hard-working patriots, not at all the violent fanatics and Gandhi-murderers propaganda had caricaturized them as.”<sup>160</sup> Marino focusses instead on aspects such as “seva” or service—such as relief work the RSS has carried out—as well as rifts and disagreements between Modi and the RSS. This myopic view serves to absolve the organisation, obscure its history and distort its place in present-day India. This is in line with his presentation of Modi as “apolitical”: ‘In a way I am

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<sup>156</sup> MS Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, 1939, Reprint, Nagpur, India: Bharat Prakashan, 1947

<sup>157</sup> Dhirendra K Jha writes: “Godse's family, including Gopal, have always maintained that he never left the RSS.” Dhirendra K. Jha, “Historical Records Expose the Lie That Nathuram Godse Left the RSS,” *The Caravan*, last modified January 1, 2020, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/historical-record-expose-lie-godse-left-rss>.

<sup>158</sup> Marino, p. 49

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36

an apolitical person. I am in the political system and that is why people know me as a politician.<sup>161</sup>

The book does engage with Godhra, and Marino declares, in language befitting a judiciary, that “It is clear to me beyond any reasonable doubt after my extensive research that Modi did everything he could to make the violence cease and abate – but that he faced resistance on several fronts.”<sup>162</sup> There is an extensive body of work scrutinising the probe into Modi’s actions at the time; reporting on testimony by Hindu extremists who claimed to have had police support thanks to Modi and accounts of a policeman named Sanjeev Bhatt who pointed to Modi’s complicity. Marino tritely dismisses an undercover media investigation, in which Babu Bajrangji, a right-wing group’s leader, alleged Modi’s complicity, stating “We had good support from the police because of Narendrabhai and that is because whatever happened in Gujarat happened for the best”<sup>163</sup>; rather than engaging with what Bajrangji boasts about, including ripping a foetus from a pregnant woman, Marino frames the investigation as a Congress expose gone afoul.

Marino places an emphasis on affect and emotion in his relaying of the violence. This shores up a contrast to how Modi has resolutely avoided publicly expressing remorse directly.<sup>164</sup> In an interview with *Reuters*, he circumvented it by saying “someone else is driving a car and we’re sitting behind, even then if a puppy comes under the wheel, will it be painful or not?”<sup>165</sup> Marino suggests that he may—crucially, in *private*—feel otherwise: “He has always refused to apologize in the form of words demanded by many reasonable people but that does not mean he feels no

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p. 102

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p. 143

<sup>163</sup> Ashish Khetan, *Under Cover: My Journey into the Darkness of Hindutva*, 2021

<sup>164</sup> Manoj Mitta, Chapter 10

<sup>165</sup> Sruthi Gottipati and Annie Banerji, “Modi’s ‘Puppy’ Remark Triggers New Controversy over 2002 Riots,” *Reuters* (Reuters, July 12, 2013), <https://www.reuters.com/article/narendra-modi-puppy-reuters-interview-idINDEE96B08S20130712>.

remorse or responsibility, for guilt is not the same as responsibility.”<sup>166</sup> On the next page, he writes that Modi told him several times, “I feel sad about what happened but no guilt. And no court has come even close to establishing it.”<sup>167</sup> Marino also emphasises that Modi was “a shaken man” experiencing “raw emotions and he felt them keenly.”<sup>168</sup> To understand why this is significant, we should contemplate the author’s construction of Modi through the book.

The repeated accentuation of Modi’s stoic sensibility and calmness through the book heavily foreshadow the version of him during the pogrom that Marino puts forward; the latter identifies Modi’s calmness on at least eight occasions, in phrases such as: “he is a calm and self-contained man in private”<sup>169</sup> and “He has a calm about him that is at odds with the fierce persona he exhibits at public rallies.”<sup>170</sup> This is not just observed in and of itself—the word “enable” is often used in conjunction too, to suggest that the trait makes Modi more capable as a leader: “he has a calm about him that enables him to surmount crises with dispassionate meticulousness,”<sup>171</sup> and “It is this meditative inner calm that has enabled him to withstand the most sustained campaign of vilification mounted against any Indian politician since 2002.”<sup>172</sup> A stoic strength in private is also built up throughout the book, “There is a sense of enormous energy, pent up, but in private also stoicism. It is this stoicism that has enabled him to survive the blows that have come his way, virtually non-stop, since 2002.”<sup>173</sup> At one point his depiction even evokes archaic humoral theory: “During the several weeks I spent interviewing him, Modi was always calm, phlegmatic, almost monk-like. When he showed emotion, it was on matters of changing systems, innovating methodologies and introducing new technology.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Marino, p. 88

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, p. 89

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, p. 80

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p. 27

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, p. 58

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, p. 27

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, p. 51

The author's repeatedly emphasised access to the politician's "private" self is, then, how he justifies the logical leaps connecting behaviour with public action during crises, presuming the calm he apparently witnessed in private was re-enacted throughout Modi's career. He also extrapolates from his time with Modi to counter public opinion (again, vaguely gestured to, without a citation): "Much has been made of Modi's emotional coldness. Having spent more time interviewing him than almost any other contemporary journalist or author, I can say with some certainty that Modi is clinical but not cold."<sup>175</sup>

The book was published just before the 2014 elections, and ostensibly sold well—its publisher said, at the time, that it was reprinted after the first run sold out, though it reportedly did not find a foreign publisher. The BJP apparently distributed copies to foreign reporters.<sup>176</sup> Popular news channels interviewed Marino about the book, and the same year, Marino was invited to an event discussing the future of UK-India business relations.<sup>177</sup> This stint as an authority on Modi was temporary, since he has not been reported as a public commentator on Modi since.

Although some journalists expressed scepticism, Marino's affect-laden reading of Modi's psychic state was what made the most headlines in the Indian press in 2014: the main part of the book that media organisations latched onto, at the time, was his disclosure of emotion, with *Livemint*, *India Today* and *Hindustan Times* and other papers carrying news reports stating Modi had felt sad but, simultaneously, not guilty. *Aaj Tak* even described it as Modi finally breaking silence on the violence. This particular fragment becoming national news in the run-up to the elections—as well as another with Marino saying "I found Modi to be very good company"<sup>178</sup>—could point to

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid, p 27

<sup>176</sup> K. S. Komireddi, *Malevolent Republic: A Short History of the New India* (London, England: C Hurst, 2019).

<sup>177</sup> India Inc. TV, "Andy Marino, Narendra Modi's Biographer, Speaks to India Inc at A New Dawn for India Seminar" (Youtube, June 30, 2014), last modified June 30, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1v\\_AQJJuKek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1v_AQJJuKek).

<sup>178</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/i-found-modi-to-be-very-good-company-andy-marino/story-I3xJn8J257QAEMnseLQBxM.html>

the authorised biography being used as a confessional form to humanise the man on the verge of becoming prime minister.

Yet, as we shall see in the following section, Marino's reinvention of Modi was not the only time that access was granted to a British writer demonstrably unfamiliar with Indian politics, who claimed unprecedented access to an authentic private self and performed objectivity and distance as well as boasting of a genial rapport with the leader. This was not, strictly speaking, a biography, but a book that marked the electoral victory of 2014. Significantly, Modi "refused to engage" with Price about Godhra (and other topics), redirecting him to the official reports, as he has done with many other writers and journalists. Yet, Price still states, "Modi had agreed to give me unprecedented access to help me analyse the campaign that had brought him to power. No other writer, Indian or foreign, was to be allowed the same privilege."<sup>179</sup> Once again, the authenticity of the book rests on the claim of a unique vantage point, despite Marino's recently published book having made the same case.

## 1.2 Lance Price's *The Modi Effect: Inside Narendra Modi's Campaign to Transform India* (2015)

A political party had not won an absolute majority since 1984. The BJP's resoundingly successful election campaign of 2014 managed this, with the party winning 282 of 543 seats and 31 percent of the vote.<sup>180</sup> The journalist Lance Price, who used to work as a spokesman for Tony Blair, published *The Modi Effect: Inside Narendra Modi's Campaign to Transform India* the following year. Though labelled as a biography by publishers, it does not have the conventional structure of one (unlike Marino's, for instance, which focusses on early years as well as later life); and instead of a

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<sup>179</sup> Lance Price, *The Modi Effect: Inside Narendra Modi's Campaign to Transform India* (London, England: Hodder Paperback, 2016). Chapter 1

<sup>180</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi's India* p. 104

biography's bildungsroman-style concern with personal development, it is hinged around the campaign itself, the win and its aftermath. Yet, it is worth considering questions the book's presence raises and examining them in relation to Marino's book.

Price's book departs from Marino's in noticeable ways. It seems warier of Modi's grandiose statements—he writes of the politician, for instance, that “when he does ‘self-effacing’ he is at his least convincing. He is as egotistical as any politician I have ever met, and his conversation is littered with references to himself in the third person.”<sup>181</sup> He is aware of Marino's book, citing it five times in the end references. At times he even appears to respond directly to the latter: unlike Marino, he briefly ventures into looking at RSS ideology by describing Savarkar's views and acknowledging the early admiration for Hitler within the organisation. He concludes that “signing up to the RSS was no childhood whim. Nor was it just the Indian equivalent of joining the Boy Scouts,”<sup>182</sup> a line that reads as a riposte to Marino's falsification.

At the beginning of his first chapter, Price reflects on the beginnings of his association with the politician, stating that “just eight weeks after taking office he made time to meet me – a foreigner with no particular expertise in Indian politics, but with a fascination for elections and respect for politicians with the vision and determination to break the mould, defy conventional wisdom and shake off old prejudices.”<sup>183</sup> He is quick to qualify that this stance does not translate into awe: “I have been in and around politics too long to be much in awe of prime ministers and presidents.”<sup>184</sup> Towards the end of the same chapter, though, situates Modi among the company of political leaders who command attention: “He is imposing, there is no doubt about that. Like the best of them, he completely dominates the room. His eyes are sharp and penetrating and I

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<sup>181</sup> Lance Price, *The Modi Effect: Inside Narendra Modi's Campaign to Transform India*, Chapter 2

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 2

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 1

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 1

found it very hard to look away from him while making notes or checking something I might want to ask.”<sup>185</sup>

Price’s construction of his own authority occurs in relation to his career in politics and public relations (rather than, say, his work as a journalist), including several references to his previous work as director of communications for Blair. He continuously forges lazy and spurious parallels with international political scenarios and figureheads; this is visible for instance, in observations that rely on global comparison for dramatic effect: “This was India’s version of Barack Obama’s ‘Yes We Can!’ but amplified a hundred times over,”<sup>186</sup> and “We battered the Conservative Party into submission ... So I am not squeamish about aggressive election campaigns.”<sup>187</sup>

The generic, analogous approach also serves as a balancing act, to deflect criticism of both Modi and Hindu nationalism: “Modi would not be the first political leader in the world to look the other way while others in his party were getting involved in dubious political manoeuvres.”<sup>188</sup> When gesturing towards Hindutva’s possible effects on policy, Price says he has noticed nothing that compares with the impact of Christianity on George Bush’s administration.<sup>189</sup> Still elsewhere, he writes that “Most parties carry with them some controversial ideological baggage, so we should not be surprised that Narendra Modi is as reluctant to talk about Hindutva as Labour leaders are to discuss the Marxist and socialist texts that were worshipped by many of their founding fathers.”<sup>190</sup> And, after detailing his cognisance that he would have to employ a different lens to analyse India than the one he would use for Western politics, Price writes:

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, Chapter 1

<sup>186</sup> Ibid

<sup>187</sup> Ibid

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, Chapter 15

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, Chapter 20

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, Chapter 3

What sounds boastful or over the top to a western ear, for example, is often perfectly acceptable in an Indian context. We have got used to mistrusting and denigrating almost everything our leaders try to tell us. That level of cynicism bordering on contempt has not yet polluted the Indian political system to the same degree. Leaders are listened to with respect and the informality of British politics – ‘call me Tony’, and so on – is all but absent here. I’m not sure I succeeded entirely, but in my conversations with Narendra Modi I did my best to listen politely to what he had to say, and to bite my tongue when the temptation arose to respond with ‘oh, come off it’, as it sometimes did.<sup>191</sup>

Here Price confirms that these cultural-relativist ideas (some provided, as we learn later, by “Indian friends”) engendered a clear deference towards his subject during interviews. Price later admitted, to *The Times*, that he was paid “an undisclosed sum” for the book and that he “had never heard of Modi” until he was approached by the politician’s associate.<sup>192</sup> It is notable, then, that despite not declaring the work to possess cold objectivity, as Marino did, Price makes a case for his project’s utter lack of bias. Although he suggests that the prospect of further recognition on the international stage as well as an aspiration to be compared to Blair and Obama may have increased his appeal for Modi, the most important factor he underscores about their exchange is his professed impartiality: “I think most important of all was that I came with no prejudices or preconceptions”<sup>193</sup>—the very same reasoning Marino used to justify his access.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of Price’s book, though, is its preoccupation with Modi, the brand—as mentioned previously, Price focusses less on personal narrative, fixating instead on the creation of Modi’s “360-degree campaign,” which meant that “whichever way you turned

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid, Chapter 1

<sup>192</sup> “Spin Doctor Was Paid for India Book,” *Times (London, England: 1788)* (The Times, n.d.), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/spin-doctor-was-paid-for-india-book-wvbdhvqwfgm>.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, Chapter 1

and wherever you looked, you would see Modi.”<sup>194</sup> An entire chapter, titled “Brand Modi,” is dedicated to the “ecosystem” behind it. Despite Price’s wariness about Modi’s own statements, when he speaks to what he calls the “whizz-kids of Team Modi,” or “the Don Draper of India’s advertising world” who worked on the campaign, he appears convinced about a separation between the domains of politics and those of public relations and advertising, declaring that these people “carried no ideological baggage and were attracted not by party politics ... but by the opportunity to work as part of a closely knit team around a man who was already being talked of as a potential prime minister.”<sup>195</sup> At other times, Price attributes the prevailing visibility of Hindu nationalism to other parts of the BJP or to the demands of supporters, and obscures Modi’s own stance in regard to these currents by suggesting an affective divide, as Marino did, between the “personal” feeling and the “public” stance taken for voters: “Whatever Modi’s personal views on the apparent tension between his development plans and the cultural agenda of some of his supporters, he chose not to express them publicly.”<sup>196</sup>

The book is full of various figures emphasising the separation of new from old India. Although, early on Price notes (again, like Marino did) Modi’s capability to blend India’s computer-savvy future and myth-laden past,<sup>197</sup> this reading shifts over the course of the book. A campaign worker tells him, in no uncertain terms, that “The distillation of Brand Modi is very modern, not at all fuddy-duddy, and very focused on what the youth of the country wants. The USP was forward looking.”<sup>198</sup> Even on the occasions that Price issues challenges, or adds caveats, to these statements, he replicates the dichotomy between the old and the new, or what he labels as a

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<sup>194</sup> Chapter 16

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, Chapter 4

<sup>196</sup> Lance Price, in Chapter 20, writes of public pressure on politicians to concede to the desires of their supporters: “I can understand the pressures on politicians who want to retain the backing of voters who may think differently to themselves. Sometimes governments have to say or do things to keep intact the broad coalition of support that put them there in the first place.”

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, Chapter 1

<sup>198</sup> Ibid, Chapter 13

“rather old-fashioned Hindu nationalist ideology”<sup>199</sup> and Modi’s “commitment to create a modern, successful and outward-looking India.”<sup>200</sup> In the penultimate chapter, Price concludes,

Looking back is not Modi’s favourite pastime, however. The most successful politicians are those who keep their eyes fixed firmly on the future, and that is exactly what Modi has always done. He could now go forward confident that the outside world was willing him to succeed and that, so long as he kept to his promise to govern for all Indians, he would be judged henceforward on what he achieved in office and no longer on events in the past.

This visionary leap into a hopeful future reproduces a phenomenon the scholar Ravinder Kaur examines in a different context, based on observations of publicity material and conversations at economic summits in Davos. The infectious energy of the branded campaign in Price’s book deploys, too, what she calls an “affective language of hope and optimism,”<sup>201</sup> through its focus on a future brimming with potential and promise. This language, when probed deeper, reveals “ties between cultural nationalism and capitalist growth, or how the old cultural politics continues to play out but is now boosted by the promise of investments.”<sup>202</sup> Price’s vision of Modi’s ability to embrace a future of economic growth, technological change and development while munificently carving a space for the country’s “myths”—it is not clear which myths—without the “old-fashioned” Hindutva ideology becomes the shaky pivot around which his analysis rests. By slotting Modi into a vague, universalised category of successful politicians, as well as reproducing the rhetoric of how things are done in the West versus the East, he

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, Chapter 13

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, Chapter 20

<sup>201</sup> Ravinder Kaur, *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India* (New Delhi, India: HarperCollins, 2021), p. 4

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, p. 245

constructs his book as entirely forward-facing, glibly overlooking what it may have missed about the past.

## Chapter 2

### Modi biographies: The Second Term

After the BJP's victory in 2019, it engendered a shift towards “dominating all the political power centers—including state governments—at any cost.”<sup>203</sup> It capitalised on its win to enact laws that had been part of the Hindu-nationalist agenda for decades, and cracked down on dissent and minorities.

In August 2019, the BJP effectively abrogated Kashmir's special status by reading down Article 370 in the Constitution, placed its elected leaders of the state under house arrest, moved more than 80,000 military troops into the region (already the most militarised in the world) gagged the media, instituted curfew and communication blackouts. The same year saw the Ayodhya judgement allowing for the construction of a Hindu temple on the ruins of the Babri Masjid

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<sup>203</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi's India* p. 350

(which had been demolished by Hindu nationalists in 1992). The discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act was passed in 2019 too, which paves the way for non-Muslim communities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh to acquire Indian citizenship; together with a proposed National Register of Citizens, this posed a threat to the citizenship of India's Muslim community. This sparked mass protests across the country, including a protest led by Muslim women in the Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood in New Delhi.

In February 2020, Delhi witnessed a spate of violence, on a scale not seen in the national capital since the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984, that targeted Muslims, resulting in the burning of Muslim properties and businesses and attacks on places of worship. Press freedom has heavily shrunk; several journalists and academics have been subjected to raids or slapped with sedition charges,<sup>204</sup> while India slipped down the World Freedom Index (from 80<sup>th</sup> in 2002 to 150<sup>th</sup> in 2022 and 161<sup>st</sup> this year out of 200 countries).<sup>205</sup> A systematic weakening of various other institutions has been visible as well, with the independence of the judiciary being increasingly compromised<sup>206</sup> and the dilution of laws that worked to further transparency.<sup>207</sup> Within the arenas of education, recent years have witnessed a ban on the hijab at educational institutions in Karnataka and persistent attempts to rewrite history, as decisions to remove any mention of the RSS in a description of Gandhi's assassin, as well as every detail about the 2002 Gujarat riots, evince.<sup>208</sup> There were several continuities as well: Modi continued to not hold press conferences, opting instead for "one-way" communication with the Indian public via his radio programme and Twitter,<sup>209</sup> as well

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<sup>204</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/19/india-enjoyed-a-free-and-vibrant-media-narendra-modis-brazen-attacks-are-a-catastrophe>

<sup>205</sup> <https://scroll.in/latest/1048455/indias-rank-on-world-press-freedom-index-drops-to-161-out-of-180-countries#:~:text=India's%20ranking%20in%20the%20World,Press%20Freedom%20Index%20since%202002;>

<sup>206</sup> <https://caravanmagazine.in/commentary/helpless-spectators>; <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/disturbing-signals-is-the-judiciary-failing-to-put-a-check-on-excesses-of-the-executive/article65790734.ece>

<sup>207</sup> <https://qz.com/india/1516380/how-indias-modi-government-is-killing-the-rti-law/>; Jaffrelot, p. 261

<sup>208</sup> <https://www.outlookindia.com/education/no-gujarat-riots-no-mughal-achievements-how-the-latest-round-of-history-revision-stands-in-the-larger-picture-news-277174>

<sup>209</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, 299

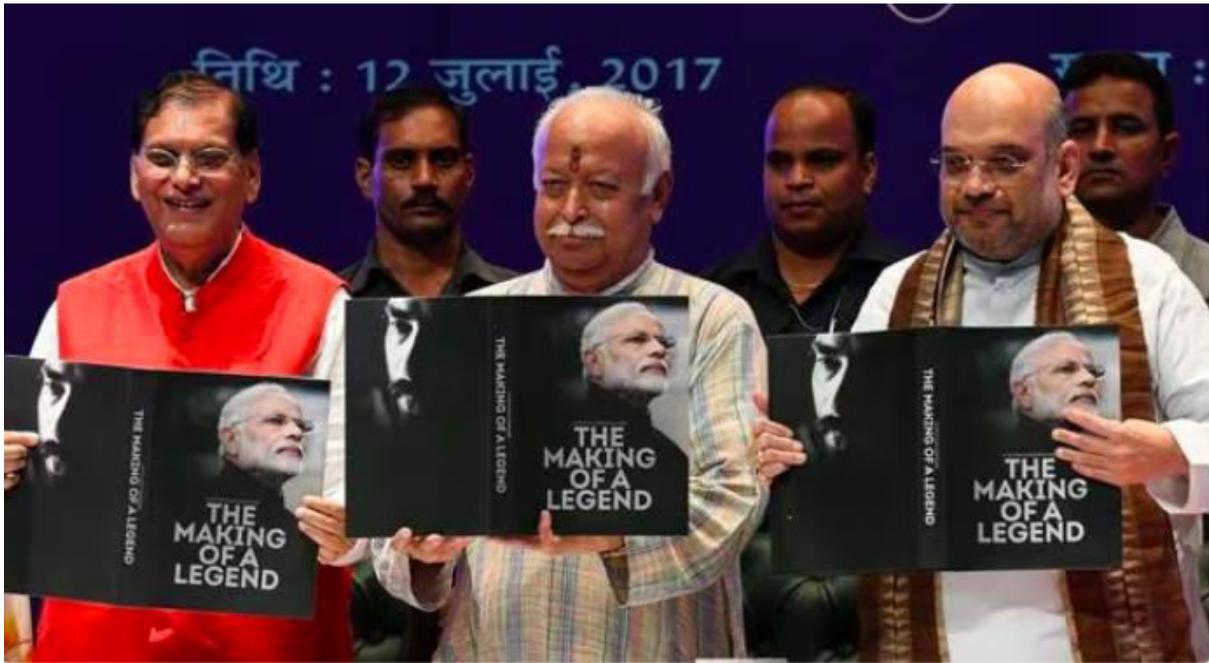
as to tightly manage public perception of its actions. A new museum to celebrate prime ministers of the country was instituted, which included Modi.

If “Hindutva since 2014 appears to be more confident, proud, brazen, and belligerent than ever before,”<sup>210</sup> and this is visible in the political arena, it has also reflected in the books written about Modi as well. Biographies and books on his term have celebrated of what are portrayed as political wins orchestrated by him from their actions in Kashmir to the huge audiences applauding him, during his first term, in the United States, to the effect of largescale campaigning and branding on elections. There is a distinct shift from previous efforts to reinvent his political career or portray him as poised to subdue nationalist agenda in place of development, to either not even engaging with Godhra or exalting how he furthered several Hindu-nationalist and development-related projects in the second term. These reveal how biographies can function as cultural memory but also as state-backed projects of forgetting.

2.1 Adish Aggarwala and Elisabeth Horan’s *Narendra Modi: Harbinger of Prosperity and Apostle of World Peace* (2020)

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<sup>210</sup> Arkotong Lonkumer and Edward Anderson, “‘Neo-Hindutva’: evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism,” 2018, p. 371



Source: *Hindustan Times*

The image shows a launch of a 2017 coffee-table book on Modi, with the current home minister, and the RSS chief, from right to left

Publications that are self-labelled or described in the press as coffee-table books—large, heavy objects typically featuring a multitude of photographs, intended primarily for display, particularly since images dominate compared to text—have been published about Modi since his first term. An RSS chief released one, called *The Making of a Legend* in 2017, for instance, and another collating images of Modi’s overseas visits was released in 2021, and most recently, one was released by the vice president to celebrate a hundred episodes of Modi’s radio programme. Modi tweeted his appreciation of this tribute.<sup>211</sup> This particular choice of format could speak to a few different impulses. This style has cache with Indian public figures because the physically imposing artefact confers a sense of legitimacy, despite also often being pro-forma or

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<sup>211</sup> <https://www.cnbc18.com/news/pm-modi-says-coffee-table-book-on-mann-ki-baat-celebrates-grassroots-level-change-makers--rising-india-summit-2023-16304881.htm>

unimaginatively designed.<sup>212</sup> It may also reveal the prioritisation of the visual mode over narrative, and, finally, serves as a pivot around which to hinge book launches and events.

In 2020, one such book, titled *Narendra Modi: Harbinger of Prosperity & Apostle of World Peace*, and calling itself a biography, was published by Adish Aggarwal and Elisabeth Horan. The former, a Delhi-based lawyer, became president of the Supreme Court Bar Association this year. The latter, an obscure American writer had neither met Modi nor been to India when she co-wrote the book.

If the hyperbolic title hints at the complete abdication of even a pretence towards an unbiased reading, the dedication confirms this, with its reverential reference to “Messiah Narendra Modi who has heralded an era of progress, prosperity and development for India.”<sup>213</sup> The language used to describe him continues, throughout the book, to echo this sense of sycophantic wonder—whether in referring to his policy decisions as “beautiful,”<sup>214</sup> being carried out “in a magnificent manner”<sup>215</sup> or with “a simple twirl of the magician wand,”<sup>216</sup> or in depicting him, with extravagant personification, to underscore public unanimity about his place in history:

a Modi Tsunami that crashed through the political opposition, drowned all opponents, and deluged the country’s political landscape with a singular image. It was the larger-than-life personality of Modi. There was also a single message – Modi hai toh mumkin

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<sup>212</sup> Maya Palit, “A Work of Propaganda Poses as Modi’s Latest Biography,” *The Caravan*, last modified July 1, 2020, <https://caravanmagazine.in/literature/another-sham-work-of-propaganda-poses-as-modi-biography>.

<sup>213</sup> Adish Aggarwala and Elisabeth Horan’s *Narendra Modi: Harbinger of Prosperity and Apostle of World Peace* (2020), p. VII

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*, P. 43

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid*, P. 53

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid*, P. 76

hai. [What was not possible is possible if Modi is around.] There was a consensus that the new Prime Minister had ensured his place in History, with a capital ‘H’.<sup>217</sup>

“Critics” are mentioned twelve times in the book, but as an indeterminate mass. The book dismisses them swiftly and peremptorily, or speaks of them as eventually acquiescing, in phrases such as “the efficacy of the idea dawned on many people, including his ardent critics”<sup>218</sup> and “critics, who later turned into supporters and loyalists.”<sup>219</sup> When the book does quote from the mainstream media, it refers to statements deifying the politician in similarly grandiose terms, such as in this snippet: “The man who is already a metaphor for something superhuman has reduced everything before him to a cipher. Like some mythic hero, he turned every weak link into a Teflon-coated asset.”<sup>220</sup> Descriptions of the prime minister as a monumental, mythic and elemental force bolster as well the book’s emphasis on a predetermined destiny bound to nation-building; for instance, childhood is portrayed as a path to leadership: “Modi’s journey on the road to become the country’s most popular Prime Minister began in childhood,”<sup>221</sup> since “even in those days the ideals of honesty, loyalty, and commitment to larger political causes engulfed Modi,”<sup>222</sup> and anecdotes such as the one involving the crocodile are illustrated as proof of “his risk-taking and spiritual tendencies.”<sup>223</sup>

Although the main intention of the book is evidently to exalt every one of Modi’s political moves in the first term, it emphasises in particular the abrogation of Kashmir’s special status. It declares that this “masterstroke” was one of the ideas behind the book’s conception, as, in its aftermath, “Modi needs to be viewed under a new spotlight; his political character needs to be put under a

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid, P. 17

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, P. 51

<sup>219</sup> Ibid, P. 77

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, P. 17

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, P. 61

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, P. 62

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, P. 62

new lens.”<sup>224</sup> This is because, in the authors’ opinion, it meant that “Modi emerged as a true global peacemaker, who resorted to aggression and diplomacy to achieve peace. The Prime Minister’s image as the harbinger of accord and reconciliation was regularly enhanced over the past five years.”<sup>225</sup> The complete communication blackout in Kashmir that went on for 172 days was the longest in history<sup>226</sup>; the book describes these measures, and the state of siege that kept a stranglehold on Kashmiri public dissent and expression, in passing, as “The wireless and wired connections stayed dead for a few weeks.”<sup>227</sup>

The book even describes the politician’s engagement with Kashmir in visceral, graphic terms, as a medical feat: “The manner in which he ejected a giant thorn embedded deep inside the nation’s body politic, salvaged a wound that had gone septic and was killing India from the inside, and possibly required amputation, was unimaginable. It fell into the realm of almost-perfect diplomacy and handling of domestic politics.”<sup>228</sup> By contrast, the Gujarat riots are cast as an imperceptible and irrelevant blip in a spotless career: “The state was free from social tension, apart from the 2002 riots, which happened a few months after he took over, and which he was slightly unprepared to deal with. There were no major riots in Gujarat between 2003 and 2014, when Modi became the country’s Prime Minister.”<sup>229</sup> This is not the same kind of elision as is visible in Marino and Price’s books—here the aside underscores the lack of need, given the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalism that was underway by 2020, for a Modi supporter to address Godhra, signifying that Modi’s image no longer requires reinventing in relation to it.

The book also executes a consistent veneration of the RSS and its leaders—it mentions a short ban against the RSS without the reason or even mentioning Gandhi’s assassination or his

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid, P. 8

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, P. 38

<sup>226</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/26/world/asia/kashmir-internet-shutdown-india.html>;  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/indias-internet-shutdown-in-kashmir-is-now-the-longest-ever-in-a-democracy/2019/12/15/bb0693ea-1dfc-11ea-977a-15a6710ed6da\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/indias-internet-shutdown-in-kashmir-is-now-the-longest-ever-in-a-democracy/2019/12/15/bb0693ea-1dfc-11ea-977a-15a6710ed6da_story.html)

<sup>227</sup> Ibid, P. 1

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, P. 32

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, P. 4

assassin; this lack of detail is reminiscent of recent omissions of such facts from school textbooks. And, if Marino's portrayal of the organisation was considered "sweet"<sup>230</sup> in this book's case the depiction is also brimming with moral righteousness, from the arbitrary use of the word "perfect" to the emphasis on virtues inculcated by the RSS: "the RSS envisaged a perfect society; thus, its Sarsanghachalak [supreme leader] must be more than perfect"<sup>231</sup> and "For him, the Shakha ... was like going to a playground. ... It taught a lot of things such as a sense of responsibility, what it means to be responsible, and a part of the larger organizational set-up. He learned patriotic songs, which he loved. He was given tasks, like give a specific message to a few people; he loved that too."<sup>232</sup>

Given this single-minded adulation, it may be more constructive to return to the format and production of the book. Pages 8 to 18, for instance, consist entirely of exceedingly complimentary notes in the form of prefaces and forewords from figures close to the BJP, including ministers of state and the party's senior leaders. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect is the book's incorporation of photographs. One aspect of the Marino and Price biographies that we have not yet considered at length are the compilation of photographs at the end. They are relevant at this point, because it would be counterproductive to talk about the book without addressing its emphasis on images, and without placing this within the larger context of how photography has been deployed by the regime.

Modi's photographs flooded print media during the 2014 campaign—appearing twice as many times in *The Times of India* as his closest competitor, the sheer ubiquity of which advanced the

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<sup>230</sup> Ranjona Banerji, "Missing the Man: A Political Biography of Narendra Modi," *The Hindustan Times* (Hindustan Times, May 10, 2014), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/missing-the-man-a-political-biography-of-narendra-modi/story-ITVAXDwE6WQxC64XZzgFwK.html>.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid*, P. 115

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid*, P. 65

notion of a permanent, promising leader.<sup>233</sup> An interest in the enduring power of the visual continued even after the election; for instance, in 2015, the BJP installed selfie booths in Delhi, where people could have photos taken by a volunteer using an app, that would show them next to a smiling Modi.<sup>234</sup> The emphasis on images was visible, as well, in the hyperpersonalised 2019 campaign.<sup>235</sup> From the 850 hours of airtime provided to him by eleven Hindi TV channels, (again more than double that allocated to his nearest rival)<sup>236</sup> to photo ops of him bathing and praying in the Ganges or meditating in a cave<sup>237</sup> or a particular preoccupation with his sartorial style, there were arguably traces of the “Bollywoodization” of the public scene” in the spectacular representations of Modi.<sup>238</sup>

Marino’s book has a chapter labelled “photographic insert,” with 27 photographs of Modi. These are fairly quotidian, representing the quintessential imagery of political leaders around the globe, showcasing, for instance, international visits, meetings with state figureheads, spiritual figures and Bollywood stars, or performing a father figure role, as in the case of the following image of him assisting unnamed differently abled children:

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, p. 163

<sup>234</sup> <https://qz.com/india/338171/forget-toilets-narendra-modi-is-building-thousands-of-selfie-booths-in-delhi>

<sup>235</sup> Jaffrelot, p. 346

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, p. 333

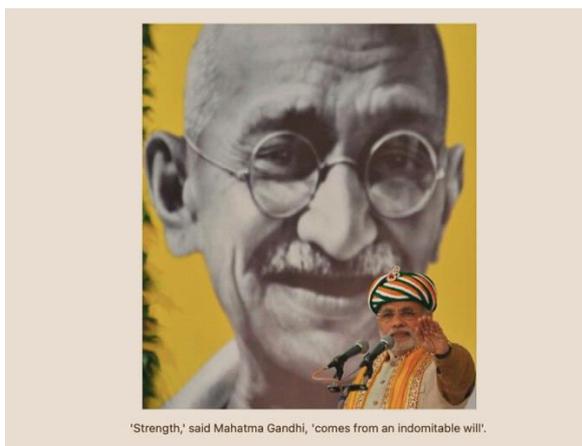
<sup>237</sup> Jaffrelot, p. 312

<sup>238</sup> Jaffrelot, p. 312

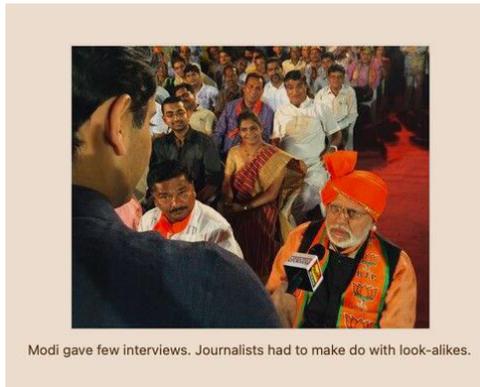


Source: Andy Marino, *Narendra Modi: A Political Biography*

Price's book too, reserves a place for photos at the tail end of the book. Among its nearly forty images of the politician are a mixture of rallies and official meetings with leaders. While some captions carry observations that, though not incorporating any critique, exhibit an awareness of contradiction or the myth-making apparatus at work, there are also photographs, such as the one against the backdrop of Gandhi and accompanied by a quote from the latter, that appear to be aggrandising his role in the nation's history.



Source: Lance Price, *The Modi Effect*

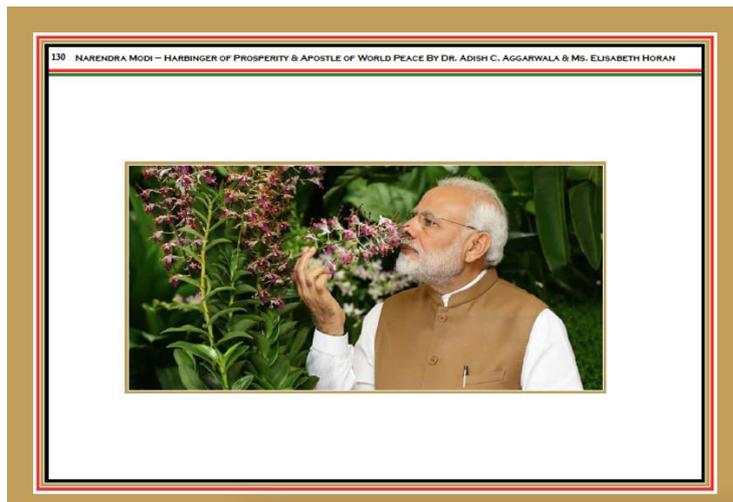


**Source:** Lance Price, *The Modi Effect*

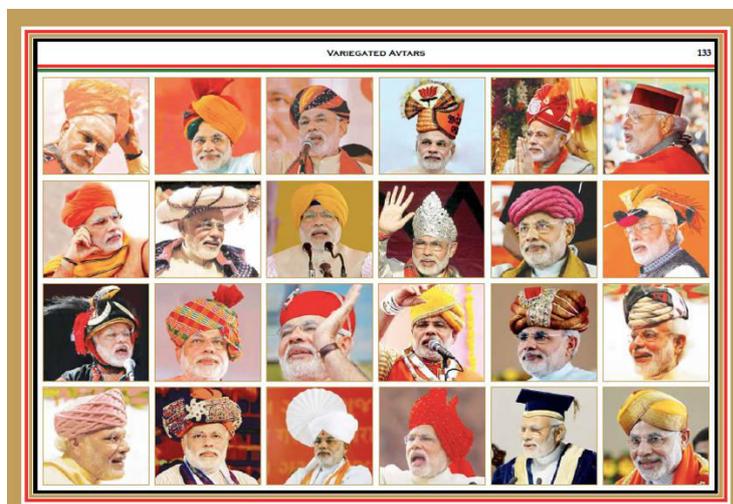
But whereas the photographs in both these books figure as an appendage of sorts to the main text, they are more the mainstay of Aggarwala's book. It has over a thousand photographs of Modi: nearly ninety of its pages at the end consist of images alone. A page-sized image is often used as a break between chapters, but there are also pages with several thumbnail images that vary on a theme, such as a collection of images of Modi in a range of headgear, labelled "Variegated Avatars." Among studies of his elaborate sartorial choices, his choice of turbans or *topis* (hats) has been viewed as a way to connect with and embody diverse regional and local populations (although his refusal, on an occasion in 2013 when he was handed a skullcap, to don one, has been pointed out).<sup>239</sup> The repetition, over almost ninety pages, coupled with the coffee-table-book format, give it the overall appearance and aura of a large scrapbook—during the launch it was apparently so heavy that colour printouts of the cover were used instead.

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<sup>239</sup> Simona Vittorini, "Modi à La Mode: Narendra Modi's Fashion and the Performance of Populist Leadership," *Commonwealth & comparative politics* 60, no. 3 (2022): 276–297



Source: Adish Aggarwala and Elisabeth Horan



Source: Adish Aggarwala and Elisabeth Horan

This brings up another aspect of the book—the circumstances under which it acquired a public life. In 2020, news reports announced that the release of a Modi biography, which was to have Donald Trump, the US president at the time, as the main guest had been postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>240</sup> In late May, an online launch took place without him. Religious gurus, various state and BJP leaders and a former chief justice of India were present. A presence that appeared somewhat puzzling within this milieu was that of Horan, the American co-author of the book, who described herself as an “acclaimed feminist poet” and recited a poem exalting

<sup>240</sup> <http://www.uniindia.com/modi-s-biography-release-by-trump-postponed-amid-corona-spread/india/news/1930910.html>; <https://thenews21.com/largest-biography-release-on-modi-by-trump-postponed-due-to-corona-outbreak>; <https://anewsofindia.com/2020/04/03/biggest-biography-released-on-modi-by-trump-postponed-due-to-coronavirus/>

Modi as a great leader.<sup>241</sup> When I interviewed her in 2020 for an article, she mentioned that had been approached by Aggarwala via a mutual friend to co-write the book, and emphasised that her contributions included providing the presence of a woman and “English skills and my language and my way of International English and speaking.”<sup>242</sup> She made her emphatic dislike of Donald Trump known to me, repeatedly contrasting him unfavourably with Modi and thereby displaying ignorance of their, at the time highly publicised, comradeship after huge parallel rallies in the United States in 2019. At the launch, instead of political or historical analysis, she appeared to be spouting generic aphorisms such as: “I feel what I have in common with such a great leader as is Modi, is a deep spirit inside to fight, to persevere and to succeed in that which we have dreamt all our life.”<sup>243</sup>

The afterlife of this book throws up certain questions. In 2020, Horan had indicated to me that the books would be presented to world leaders, while the other co-author, Adish Aggarwala, an advocate, mentioned at the time that he was planning to print around five thousand copies, but provide free copies to universities and political workers as well as scores of Indians over Whatsapp.<sup>244</sup> (The book’s hardcover price, in an early version, stated it was priced at Rs 12,000 or \$125, an absurdly and arbitrarily high price.) The book’s vaguely named publisher “USA Publication and Distribution House,” which has no other books or digital presence, appeared at the time to be a terminated company, created by Horan at her Vermont home in September 2019.<sup>245</sup> Equally spurious was UK Publishers & Distributors Limited, the cited publisher of *Narendra Modi: A Charismatic & Visionary Statesman*, a previous and very similar coffee-table book by Aggarwala that was published on Modi’s sixty-sixth birthday.<sup>246</sup> News reports at the time

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<sup>241</sup> Maya Palit, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

<sup>242</sup> Ibid

<sup>243</sup> Ibid

<sup>244</sup> Ibid

<sup>245</sup> Ibid

<sup>246</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/new-biography-of-narendra-modi-containing-his-rare-photos-to-hit-the-shelves-on-thursday/articleshow/48987778.cms>

predicted it would probably be released by David Cameron, the British prime minister at the time. It had been co-authored as well, this time with a British woman described as an “eminent author” and “a solicitor of international repute” on the book’s blurb. Yet no information is available about her in the public domain, apart from her association with this book or as a one-time director of an organisation Aggarwala founded. The publisher’s address, as cited inside the book, was also the same as that of his organisation.

Modi appears to be aware of his efforts, since the newer book, on its second page, includes his signature, labelled “Compliments of the prime minister” for the second edition of *Narendra Modi: A Charismatic & Visionary Statesman*. While Aggarwala does apparently still continue to present his book to other political figures, he has also cited it as a reason for insinuations against him from the Opposition. In 2016, he was reported to have expressed his ire that his first Modi biography did not make him “first choice”<sup>247</sup> for the BJP, accusing the party of supporting another candidate in elections for the Supreme Court Bar Association. (Aggarwala became the president of the SCBA this year.)

If Price’s book exhibited a turn away from the personal narrative to a focus on the professional brand, Aggarwala’s books represent a departure from the form, style or mode of either of the biographies discussed so far. The dominance of photographs, the bustling claims, the odd nature of the collaboration, the promise of presenting it to political leaders and the litany of compliments from government dignitaries demand that we look at it, instead, as an artefact created by someone intent on making his position regarding the Modi regime known (he also held a photo “tribute” to mark the politician’s birthday last year).<sup>248</sup> In 2020, he had told me the

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<sup>247</sup> <https://www.legallyindia.com/the-bench-and-the-bar/new-scba-prez-suri-top-seniors-behind-win-losing-side-claims-bjp-politics-ignored-his-modi-biography-20161220-8172>

<sup>248</sup> <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/general-news/aiba-chairman-organises-photo-exhibition-to-celebrate-pm-modis-legacy-in-delhi-articleshow.html>

purpose behind the book was to spread the prime minister's message around the world, to indicate that India has a stable government and that people should invest in India.

## 2.2 *Modi@20: Dreams Meet Delivery*; miscellaneous authors (2022)

One of the most recent books celebrating Modi is a compilation of pieces by senior political figures, including the external affairs minister, the home minister, the national security advisor; a philanthropist, a tech billionaire and an author; celebrities, including prominent sports players and actors and so on, this book seeks to mark twenty years of Modi's participation in governance. It has been edited and compiled by the Bluekraft Digital Foundation; this group had advertised itself as the "technology and knowledge partner" for *Exam Warriors*, Modi's book on tests, and its founders have a longstanding relationship with the BJP.<sup>249</sup>

The book has biographical articles charting Modi's rise as well as deifying articles on how he supported entrepreneurs committed to nation-building; how he represents "the emergence of a global phenomenon"; how he stands alone in India's history, because the difference between him and previous prime minister is that "theory has been put into *effective* practice"; and how he is "the man India trusts in a crisis." Several contributors herald him as a messianic figure, evident from lines emphasising the country's enduring faith in him, "most citizens trust that the country is in safe hands with him at the helm... One sentiment transcends regional and social divides—'*Modi Sambhal Lenge*' or Modi will handle it. Until now, such phrases were only heard about prominent cricketers handling tricky run chases."<sup>250</sup> Whereas the reference to, and easy dismissal of, critics is visible here—"an ability to disarm and seek common cause with even the most ardent critics"—one contributor invokes TS Eliot to convey that there is no chasm between

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<sup>249</sup> *Outlookindia.com*, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/website-which-busted-fake-news-for-13-union-ministers-linked-to-modis-exam-warri/310456>.

<sup>250</sup> *Modi@20: Dreams Met Delivery*, Rupa, New Delhi: 2022, p. 233

Modi's promises and his delivery of them: "We are lucky that as far as Prime Minister Modi is concerned, no shadow falls between the idea and the reality."<sup>251</sup>

I intend here to analyse the aftermath of its publishing, because it evinces some of what has been discussed so far about what these books activate within the public sphere. In September 2022, the External Affairs minister S Jaishankar tweeted photographs of discussions he had been part of, in New York and Washington DC, about *Modi@20: Dreams Meet Delivery*.<sup>252</sup> He presided over another launch of the book in Auckland the following month.<sup>253</sup> At one event, he reads from the badminton player PV Sindhu's piece in the book labelling Modi as an "undisputed youth icon" because he dares to "push...boundaries, dream the impossible and make it happen." (He adds a little flourish here because his next line, "And that is Modi," is not in Sindhu's paragraph in the book.<sup>254</sup>) Jaishankar pauses triumphantly, while the audience breaks into applause.<sup>255</sup>

The book seemed to function, like Aggarwala's as a fulcrum at officious events—a union minister released its Telugu version at a book festival<sup>256</sup>; the home minister released the Marathi version<sup>257</sup>; the minister of defence released the Gujarati edition<sup>258</sup> and so on. Absurdly, the Kerala BJP accused Calicut University of being pro Pakistan when it removed the book from its display of new books after two weeks, with the BJP state president declaring that this act meant that "the university authorities have insulted the Indian Constitution and the country's democratic

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<sup>251</sup> *Modi@20*, p. 309

<sup>252</sup> S. Jaishankar, "Pleased to Participate in a Book Discussion on *Modi@20: Dreams Meet Delivery* in New York. Thank Indo American Arts Council for Organizing the Interaction. Pic.twitter.com/xcn3ontdbw," *Twitter*, last modified September 23, 2022. <https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1573101640273612801?s=20>.

<sup>253</sup> "EAM S Jaishankar Launches Book 'Modi@20: Dreams Meet Delivery' in Auckland," *Adda247*, last modified October 8, 2022, <https://currentaffairs.adda247.com/eam-s-jaishankar-launches-book-modi20-dreams-meet-delivery-in-auckland/>.

<sup>254</sup> *Modi@20*, p. 23

<sup>255</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/drsjaishankar/videos/2928253804148903>

<sup>256</sup> G. V. Subba Rao, "Union Tourism Minister Releases Telugu Version of 'Modi@20' in Vijayawada," *Thehindu.com*, last modified February 14, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/union-tourism-minister-releases-telugu-version-of-modi20-in-vijayawada/article66509559.ece>.

<sup>257</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/who-used-to-roar-based-on-lies-amit-shah-s-jibe-at-uddhav-thackeray-101676739276363.html>

<sup>258</sup> <https://newsroompost.com/india/rajnath-singh-releases-gujarati-edition-of-modi-20-book-in-gandhinagar/5202321.html>

tradition.”<sup>259</sup> The university apparently then said it would bring the book back, to avoid controversy, but that all new books are moved from the display after the same amount of time. In the meantime, the book sold “like hot cakes” at the BJP office in Jaipur.<sup>260</sup> While these instances can be dismissed as white noise, they do point to how the book’s existence and the nature of its dissemination mobilises another method of flooding the public sphere.

While news reports claimed that the finance minister had stated that the book could be used as a textbook for a management course,<sup>261</sup> a union minister had apparently compared it to the Bhagavad Gita, a religious text.<sup>262</sup> The home minister made the same analogy, reportedly declaring that “This book will rise up to become equivalent to ‘Gita’”—suggesting perhaps, that it would be as instructive, or spiritually important—“for those who believe in the path of building a complete persona and those who are in the field of social work and politics.”<sup>263</sup> A post on the book on the Government of India blog states “It’s no exaggeration to call it a guide like the Arthashastra for modern political aspirants,”<sup>264</sup> alluding to an ancient Sanskrit treatise on statecraft.

The central point to note here is not that of the abundant praise, which is not conspicuous at all, but the grandiose projections about the book’s important afterlife—the comparison to religious scriptures, for instance, suggests that a book designed to deify the prime minister transitions into an artefact that is simultaneously argued to be representative of the nation’s democratic ideals while also being sacred. The placing of this book alongside textbooks or ancient texts and the quarrels about where it is placed in a university bookstand signifies why it is critical that they

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<sup>259</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/thiruvananthapuram/kerala-bjp-rakes-up-row-over-removal-of-modi-book-from-calicut-university-library-display-8154622/>

<sup>260</sup> <https://odishatv.in/news/offbeat/-modi-20-sapne-hue-sakar-sells-like-hot-cakes-at-bjp-office-in-jaipur-200759>

<sup>261</sup> <https://news.abplive.com/news/india/modi-20-dreams-meet-delivery-can-be-used-as-textbook-for-management-courses-says-fm-nirmala-sitharaman-1553715>

<sup>262</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/modi20-book-as-gita-upadesh-only-the-latest-encomium-in-a-long-list-8109140/>

<sup>263</sup> Ibid

<sup>264</sup> <https://blog.mygov.in/editorial/book-review-of-modi20-dreams-meet-delivery/>

exist as physical texts, in the first place, rather than information disseminated via blogs or social-media posts, despite the overall dwindling relevance of print.

Projects such as these aggrandising anthologies by figures close to the state need to be situated within a wider ambit, given that India is currently witnessing the large-scale rewriting of history, via elision or myth-making, from deletions in school textbooks, to the distortion of science<sup>265</sup> and reinvention of political legacies in mainstream cinema and media. The vastly different strategies of writing around the prime minister—from conventional biographies premised on the personality to texts that prioritise the brand, photographs or opinions by state officials—indicate both an inclination to depict the politician as a future-facing embodiment of hope for the nation as well as one for revising the national past.

When books or biographies transition from narratives into venerated objects entwined with the national identity, they move “from personal memory to cultural memory to history, and the political stakes are quite different in each.” And, although it is critical to note that these narratives are perpetually transforming through acts of “repetition or reenactment,” as, for instance, narratives of Modi’s have shifted from the first to the second term, “we can scrutinize their cooptation into normalizing strategies.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/02/hindu-nationalists-claim-ancient-indians-had-airplanes-stem-cell-technology-and>; <https://scroll.in/latest/1048280/propaganda-minister-defends-removal-of-darwins-theory-of-evolution-from-school-textbooks>

<sup>266</sup> Marita Sturken, “Personal Stories and National Meanings,” *The Seductions of Biography*, Chapter 2

## Chapter 3

The proliferation of biographical material around Modi may appear to be accumulating on a scale larger than that of any other current politician, but it is no way a novelty. Eighteen biographies were published over Indira Gandhi's years in power, and several more since, and there is a reason that comparisons are repeatedly drawn between her and Modi, gesturing to the strengths of their cults of personality, centralisation of power,<sup>267</sup> the myth-making apparatus cultivated by their supporters, as well as their regimes' populist styles, clampdown on dissent and authoritarian tendencies.<sup>268</sup> And while "Is Modi the new Indira Gandhi?"<sup>269</sup>—pondered by, among others, one of her more recent biographers—seems like a facile starting point, since it glosses over significant differences between the politicians, turning to Gandhi's regime evinces other periods in the country's past when ardent public interest in the persona of a politician resembled the fervour that presently exists around Modi.

In the chapter that follows, I will lay out the main historical markers of Gandhi's time as prime minister; examine the prevailing tendencies in the spate of biographies of her, including how they approach myth-making, gender and the nation; and, although exploring several texts is beyond the scope of this project, I will analyse a biography written by Gandhi's close friend—Pupul Jayakar's *Indira*—because it was famously authorised, to investigate how it binds together Gandhi's personal trajectory with the national story.

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<sup>267</sup> Gyan Prakash, "Modi Reminds India of Indira Gandhi. Will He Share Her Electoral Fate?," 8 May 2019, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/08/opinion/india-elections-modi-gandhi.html>

<sup>268</sup> <https://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/interview--Narendra-Modi-is-Indira-Gandhi-s-true-heir-says-Sagarika-Ghose-in-new-book-2503228>

<sup>269</sup> <https://scroll.in/announcements/958796/video-is-narendra-modi-the-new-indira-gandhi-sagarika-ghose-and-rajdeep-sardesai-discuss>

### 3.1 Indira Gandhi

Indira Gandhi, born in 1917, was the only child of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first post-Independence prime minister, who ruled the country from 1947 until he died, in 1964. Growing up in a family entrenched in the anti-colonial freedom movement, which was gathering immense momentum, meant that her parents were often in and out of prison; nonetheless, the family was elite, dominant-caste, upper class and Westernised, which afforded privileges including education and stints abroad. Historians are divided on whether she was reluctant about entering politics at all,<sup>270</sup> positing that she had no steadfast underlying ideological convictions<sup>271</sup> and entered it "despite herself and against her own inclinations," or, alternatively, finding that "her drive for power was inherent, manifesting itself even in childhood."<sup>272</sup> Gandhi was elected as president of the Congress Party in 1959, though apparently had considered leaving politics and moving to England with her sons after this stint.<sup>273</sup>

However, after holding positions in the Congress party, as well as in the government as information of minister and broadcasting, following the sudden death of her father's successor in 1966, she was made prime minister. Although at the time the syndicate of regional Congress politicians thought of this as a temporary, strategic situation in which she would prove useful and pliant, Gandhi was quick to consolidate her power and remained prime minister until 1977, and then again from 1980 until she was assassinated, in 1984. Over this time, she transformed the Congress party (which split in 1969) and centralised power in her hands,<sup>274</sup> won populist campaigns based on grandiose promises (including doing away with poverty)<sup>275</sup> and led India in a war against Pakistan, in 1971, that led to the creation of Bangladesh and deepened her hold over

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<sup>270</sup> Srinath Raghavan, "Nine. Indira Gandhi: India and the World in Transition," in *Makers of Modern Asia* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014), 215–243., p. 220;

<sup>271</sup> Ibid

<sup>272</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, p. 102

<sup>273</sup> Raghavan, p. 220;

<sup>274</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, p. 221

<sup>275</sup> Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, p. 2

the Indian public<sup>276</sup>—after this, “even veteran politicians dissolved into sycophants around her.”<sup>277</sup> She also allocated power in the hands of bureaucrats rather than elected politicians, and increasingly relied on her sons, Sanjay and Rajiv, to enter into and manage party affairs, thereby turning the Congress “into a family firm.”<sup>278</sup>

Faced with considerable popular protest, which started with student uprisings but coalesced into a widespread reform campaign bringing together diverse political parties,<sup>279</sup> she declared the Emergency, in 1975. Continuing for nearly two years, this was the effective suspension of Indian democracy and civil liberties, with restrictions on constitutional rights, including the right to freedom of expression, create unions or gather peacefully.<sup>280</sup> Overall, the period saw a stranglehold on the press and censorship of dissent, the mass arrests of Opposition politicians and the incarceration of 110,000 citizens,<sup>281</sup> state violence, gentrification drives and slum clearances engendering massive displacement, and, significantly, the sterilisation of 11 million citizens. Sterilisation as a measure to tackle population growth had already been in use, but after the central government was granted the power to carry out family-planning programmes in 1976, this strategy was enacted with a new aggression by Sanjay Gandhi,<sup>282</sup> who insisted on vasectomy camps and targets for states.<sup>283</sup> (Incidentally, “beautification” or gentrification of urban areas was also his brainchild.) The programme turned out to be both directly and indirectly coercive. There were cases of police firing at those who resisted it,<sup>284</sup> people being seized and forcibly sterilised;<sup>285</sup> and at least two thousand deaths, resulting from botched operations.<sup>286</sup> Certificates

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<sup>276</sup> Gyan Prakash, “Modi Reminds India of Indira Gandhi. Will He Share Her Electoral Fate?” available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/08/opinion/india-elections-modi-gandhi.html>

<sup>277</sup> Ibid

<sup>278</sup> Raghavan, p. 225

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, p. 226

<sup>280</sup> Ibid; Christophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil, *India's First Dictatorship* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>281</sup> Pratinav Anil and Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 17

<sup>282</sup> <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/india-the-emergency-and-the-politics-of-mass-sterilization/>

<sup>283</sup> Ibid

<sup>284</sup> <https://www.peepultree.world/livehistoryindia/story/eras/india-experiment-with-forced-sterilization>

<sup>285</sup> <https://qz.com/india/1414774/the-legacy-of-indias-quest-to-sterilise-millions-of-men>

confirming sterilisation often became a prerequisite for salaries, free healthcare or procuring ID, while students whose parents had not had the process done were detained, and so on.<sup>287</sup> The poorest sections of society were most vulnerable to this draconian policy, and the Emergency era remains deeply entwined with *nasbandi*—sterilisation—in popular memory.<sup>288</sup>

Although the Emergency's policies did not affect every part of the country uniformly, nor with the same degree of intensity,<sup>289</sup> it can be described, in general, as “an authoritarian regime which encouraged the depoliticisation of society, tolerated opposition so long as it operated in a highly circumscribed space,” and also displayed features of Max Weber's theory of “sultanism.”<sup>290</sup> Scholars have continued to debate some of Gandhi's political decisions that followed, such as the reasons for her decision to end the Emergency and issue a call for free and fair elections in 1977—perhaps after being stung by international criticism, or because she was convinced she would win. She lost, however, to the Janata Party, which then dismissed many Congress state governments; but this coalition, being unstable, ultimately fell apart, leading to another election in 1980 and Gandhi's return to power.

This time around, Gandhi also shifted right-ward, catering to the rising demands of Hindu nationalism and furthering the communalisation of politics while also dissolving state governments run by her opponents. The decision to sign off on Operation BlueStar in June 1984—the storming, by the army, of the Golden Temple in Amritsar (the most important sacred shrine for Sikhs)—as a move to crush insurgency in Punjab, led to hundreds of deaths, including of civilians, and damage to the holy site. This prompted her assassination, a few months on, by

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<sup>286</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30040790>

<sup>287</sup> <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/india-the-emergency-and-the-politics-of-mass-sterilization/>

<sup>288</sup> Trina Nileena Banerjee, “Political Iconography and the Female Political Leader: The Case of Indira Gandhi,” available at: <http://humanitiesunderground.org/political-iconography-the-female-political-leader-the-case-of-indira-gandhi-some-initial-questions/>

<sup>289</sup> Pratinav Anil and Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 18

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22

her Sikh bodyguards, which was followed by a horrific pogrom involving a largescale massacre of Sikhs by Hindu mobs across North India—nearly three thousand Sikhs were murdered in Delhi alone—who were led largely by Congress leaders. Soon after, Gandhi’s son, Rajiv, who was sworn in as prime minister after a landslide electoral victory on a “sympathy wave,” said, “When Indira’s assassination happened, there were riots in the country. We know that the hearts of the Indian people were full of anger and that for a few days people felt India was shaking. When a big tree falls, the earth shakes,” a phrase many have read as justification of the brutal violence that had ensued.<sup>291</sup>

A personality cult had developed around Indira Gandhi during her rule, which, like the cult around Modi, mutated as she enacted different public personas. One of these was a maternal stance towards the nation, which materialised early on in her political career. Besides constantly flaunting her identity as the daughter of the independent leader’s first leader, she projected “(symbolic) maternal concern for the people of the nation,” being hailed as “Mother India” during the 1967 elections.<sup>292</sup> After the 1971 victory against Pakistan, she was compared to Durga, a goddess in the Hindu pantheon thought to represent invincible bravery (an aide of hers even admitted that “she loved being called Durga”<sup>293</sup>) and was also deemed the personification of other Hindu religious figures, such as Lakshmi and Sita, thought to symbolise prosperity and purity. She was also referred to as “Iron Lady,” “Warrior Queen” and “Freedom’s Daughter”; and, drawing on Gandhi’s own fixation with Joan of Arc as a child, commentaries on the nature of her assassination evoked that mythic martyr stereotype too.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> <https://scroll.in/video/1558/watch-rajiv-gandhi-make-his-infamous-big-tree-falls-speech-justifying-the-1984-anti-sikh-riots>

<sup>292</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, p. 105

<sup>293</sup> Anil and Jaffrelot, p. 282

<sup>294</sup> Katherine Frank, “The Lives of Indira Gandhi,” in Pauline Polkey, ed., *Women’s Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/Biography*, Macmillan Press Ltd, London: 1999, p. 162

Put together, the coalescing of these various myths around her personality indicated that, quite early into her regime, “a strong undertone of religiosity and the sense of a mystical, yet terrifying, female power surrounded the popular perception of Indira Gandhi’s authoritarian rule.”<sup>295</sup> Yet, given the immense turbulence of Gandhi’s years in power, public memorialisation has included both searing critiques of her legacy and nostalgic support remembering her (via opinion polls, for instance) as the best prime minister the country has had, leading scholars to argue that “the afterlives of Indira Gandhi seem as puzzling and paradoxical as her life.”<sup>296</sup>

### 3.2 Tropes of Gandhi biography

Cinematic representations of Gandhi were thin on the ground since censorship of the film industry during the Emergency was immense, and Gandhi retained tight control over her image—for instance, a biopic was banned, as was a film with a character resembling Gandhi, and a political spoof film parodying her son, Sanjay; even *All the President’s Men* was banned with the premise that the public might equate her with Nixon.<sup>297</sup> However, she did become a go-to subject for biographers—nearly twice as many have been written on her as on her father, despite him far more popular as well as the first prime minister.<sup>298</sup>

Unlike with contemporary Modi biographies, the advantage of hindsight is evident here, as a few insightful panoramic studies of the sizeable oeuvre around Indira Gandhi already exist. Prior to publishing her own biography of the leader, for instance, the American author Katherine Frank examined life-writing on Indira, pointing out a typology of work stemming from different impetuses across four phases. There was the “Who is she?” category that exploded in the 1960s, soon after Gandhi’s ascent to power; this was followed by another flurry of books after her 1971

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<sup>295</sup> Trina Nileena Banerjee, “Political Iconography and the Female Political Leader: The Case of Indira Gandhi.”

<sup>296</sup> Raghavan, p. 216

<sup>297</sup> Pratinav Anil and Christophe Jaffrelot, p. 61

<sup>298</sup> Katherine Frank, “The Lives of Indira Gandhi,” in *Women’s Lives into Print* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1999), p. 152

victory and skyrocketing popularity; an “anti-Gandhi”<sup>299</sup> series critical of her in the wake of the Emergency (including one about-turn from a former biographer, who grew disenchanted and penned a critical text three years after a largely positive one); and finally, a posthumous cluster of books—the “Who was she?”<sup>300</sup> mode—attempting to grapple with her legacy as well as fixating on her assassination.

Many of the concerns Frank articulates about the suspect credibility of some of these biographies are applicable to the material examined in previous chapters on Modi as well: the “ad hoc air” and the lack of a critical approach turning some texts into “covert autobiographies”<sup>301</sup> because of a “blinding identification”<sup>302</sup> (somewhat amusingly, she points out that while this inclination towards identification was often willfully executed by the authors, in one notable case, Gandhi’s biographer Mary C Carras was mistaken for Gandhi, and subjected to intense and confusing adulation from throngs of crowds). Frank raises as well that several “basic problems such as the distance between biographer and subject, the relationship between the personal and the political in a politician’s life, the dangers of mythic and stereotypical representations of Gandhi, and the significance of gender in her life are consistently overlooked.”<sup>303</sup>

Frank’s main thrust of inquiry, though, is gender. Noting that many of Gandhi’s largely male biographers were “mesmerised” by their subject, she observes the lack of a feminist biography (Gandhi herself famously avoided women’s movements or feminism too)<sup>304</sup> and that no biographies have focused squarely on gender despite it having had “a profound effect on the way she has been constructed as a biographical subject.”<sup>305</sup> Her analysis, intended as a corrective to

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<sup>299</sup> Jayakar, p. 156

<sup>300</sup> Ibid, p. 154

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, p. 159

<sup>302</sup> Ibid, p. 159

<sup>303</sup> Ibid, p. 157

<sup>304</sup> Ibid, p. 165

<sup>305</sup> Katherine Frank, p. 154-5

this, points out that one prevailing tendency of Gandhi's biographies' is the effort to feminise her while also cordoning off the private from the public while doing so. This divide is illustrated often in the organisation of the texts themselves, for instance, chapters with details about her hairstyle, diet, wardrobe and hostess skills are often separated from those about her political ruthlessness; a single chapter tends to compile information about her marriage, as if to compartmentalise this side of her life; and her "personal years" precede the part of the text that delves into her political career.<sup>306</sup> The scholar Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has commented on this dichotomy as well, writing that, in Gandhi biographies, "the private self (alone) is gendered female, and the public figure, whether mask, persona, or role is scrupulously represented in non-sexist 'neutral' terms. The two spheres are so absolutely separated that the female subject comes to be seen as a split or schizophrenic personality."<sup>307</sup>

With various critical Gandhi biographies, a visible focus has been the deconstruction of her personality, to hunt for "authoritarian" traits—these have tended to venture into psychobiography, pointing to, among other things, the adjective "insecure" cropping up in her speeches and short autobiography; "paranoid worries" over "rumour-mongers" and "anti-nationalists"; her reserve, silence and frequent refusal to engage in dialogue; "the determination to dominate, lest she be dominated"; and, according to a biography penned by her estranged cousin, an inferiority complex stemming from her father's stature.<sup>308</sup> However, as scholars of the Emergency have emphasised, "to suggest that loneliness and her intellectual limitations led her to press the panic button in 1975, as some writers do, is scarcely credible."<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid, 160

<sup>307</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism. London and New York: Routledge, 1993," *Oxford literary review* 16, no. 1 (1994): 273–285, p. 110

<sup>308</sup> Pratinav Anil and Christophe Jaffrelot, p. 276 and p. 283

<sup>309</sup> Ibid, p. 277

Given that incisive analyses of the Gandhi oeuvre at the confluence of gender and biography, and critiques of the “ad hominem” overly determinist psychobiography exist already, I will focus instead on one biography’s interaction with myth-making and its representation of the dynamic between the leader and the nation.

### 3.3 Pupul Jayakar’s *Indira Gandhi: A Biography* (1992)

Gandhi is reported to have been “unusually accessible and forthcoming to biographers,” authorising many of the books herself, but also fought with most of them before the books were finished.<sup>310</sup> Among the exceptions was her close friend, Pupul Jayakar. Sometime in the 1970s, Indira Gandhi asked Jayakar to write a biography of her, offering to help provide an understanding of her life’s contradictions. Jayakar, who was tight with the family—and also an author, besides working in the handicrafts and handloom sector and as a cultural adviser in the Congress government under Indira (The *NYT* once referred to her once as a “czarina of culture”<sup>311</sup>)—refused. In her foreword to her 1992 biography, she explains that she told Gandhi that “to write a biography of a friend and Prime Minister was an impossibility and would lead inevitably to the loss of a friend.”<sup>312</sup> Two weeks before Gandhi’s death, as Jayakar narrates it, she offered to do it after all, and Gandhi jumped at the idea. Her death brought their recordings to a halt, but two years later, Jayakar resumed the project, recreating Gandhi’s life out of notes from their conversations, correspondence, memory, newspapers and interviews with her colleagues.

Unlike the texts by Marino or Price, or Frank’s Gandhi biography, which was publicised as the first “non-partisan” one,<sup>313</sup> in this case there is no pretence of objectivity—indeed there cannot

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<sup>310</sup> Frank, p. 152

<sup>311</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/02/arts/pupul-jayakar-81-led-revival-of-arts-and-handicrafts-in-india.html>

<sup>312</sup> Pupul Jayakar, *Indira Gandhi: A Biography*, p. 9

<sup>313</sup> <https://www.waterstones.com/book/indira/katherine-frank/9780006387152>

be, with the writer being among Gandhi's best friends. Jayakar notes upfront, in the foreword, that her close connection with Gandhi complicates the task ahead of her. She adds a sanctimonious note about the general dangers of deifying heroes, and also states the book "is not a political biography,"<sup>314</sup> but an attempt to unearth Gandhi's hidden personalities. However, the narrative's cloudiness and evasion surrounding Gandhi's brutal legacy in general, and the Emergency or Operation BlueStar in particular, nonetheless makes it a political act. And despite her portrayal of their dynamic as one in which she played the role of patient, largely passive listener— "For all my friendship, I was not of her world; I posed no threat at any level. I remained an outsider, a mirror. She could unburden herself without threat or backlash"<sup>315</sup>—at certain junctures in the text, she does mention being turned to by the Gandhis for advice, on public speeches and handling of public affairs.

Rather than the lack of critical distance, which is a foregone conclusion, therefore, what is important about Jayakar's framing is how she professes to "measure her perceptions against a people's view of the individual and her actions."<sup>316</sup> At the same time, Jayakar also draws on her close equation with Gandhi to give credence to her conjecture about psychological and emotional states. This aspiration to refract the leader via the opinions of the public, while also corroborating this public image with a deeply subjective reading, results in a particular construction of mythology of both the public and a political persona wholly synonymous with the nation.

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<sup>314</sup> Pupul Jayakar, p. 9

<sup>315</sup> Ibid, p. 469

<sup>316</sup> Ibid, p. 9

### 3.4 Myth and the nation in Jayakar's *Indira*

The setting of an atmospheric scene at the outset is a common enough trope across biographies. Marino's prologue, for instance, which had himself and Modi driving to a helipad with heavy security behind them, while the threat of ISI looms over Modi, had echoes of a breathless modern car chase. Jayakar, by contrast, harks to the past. This is not at all a picture of a recent, graspable past, but a vision that works hard to establish an ancient, almost primordial connection between Indira and the Hindu roots of the nation. Jayakar starts the chapter with a description of a Hindu pilgrimage site and a backdrop of rivers that "forms part of the sacred landscape of India" and is "resonant with legend" by way of being cemented in the Hindu epics. In the fourth paragraph, she introduces Gandhi:

Along these river banks, in 1917, the year of Indira Nehru Gandhi's birth, grew ancient shade-giving trees, the banyan and the peepal, heavy with leaf-cover; with leaves that absorbed the dust in summer, were washed clean in the monsoon rains; trees that gave shelter to the mendicant, the beggar, the weary pilgrim; to the parrot, the squirrel and the cobra.<sup>317</sup>

With this elemental, fable-like language (the flora, fauna and human figures she mentions are staples of didactic parables), she strives to both establish a majestic historical canvas, as well as to situate Gandhi within it, even if tenuously so. She portrays Gandhi's death in similar terms, writing that "speech entered fire, the breath entered into air, the eye into the sun, the mind into the moon ... her hair into herbs and trees and the blood into water"<sup>318</sup> and frames her biographical project too in this rhetoric: "I have attempted to trace as in a river, Indira Gandhi's

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<sup>317</sup> Jayakar, p. 15

<sup>318</sup> Jayakar, p. 594

life from its source.”<sup>319</sup>(Jayakar is not the only biographer to deploy this particular brand of hyperbole; the journalist Dom Moraes, for instance, wrote breathlessly of Gandhi in elemental terms in his biography as well: “her eyes under their kestrel hoods were like ice and fire.”<sup>320</sup>)

The narration recounts Gandhi’s childhood visits to the pilgrimage site in a hyperbolic fashion too:

She absorbed as a child, “through the pores of the skin”, the intensity of the colours, strong and muted; the resonance of the chants and people’s voices; the myths and their re-enactment; the swift movement of birds and the lazy walk of bulls. She saw the face of the peasant, gaunt and shrunk with ancient eyes, but with the strength and dignity that is part of sharing and belonging. It is along these river banks that Indira came alive to the antiquity of the earth and the mystery of seasons.<sup>321</sup>

Even by this very early point in the text, the word “ancient” has already featured four times; a word that the author uses for Gandhi herself several times over the course of the text, whether recounting Gandhi’s father saying she “looks very ancient and wise”<sup>322</sup> or observing, herself, how the leader had “an unexplored density, an ancient face”<sup>323</sup> Here, though, the word is coupled with the emphasis on Gandhi’s alertness to the “antiquity of the earth” and her absorption of her surroundings, practically via osmosis in this far-fetched rendition, through “pores of the skin” (the text deploys direct quote marks without explanation here, so it is unclear whether this phrasing comes from Gandhi herself). Jayakar, then, embeds Gandhi’s very body into this mythological landscape.

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid, p. 564

<sup>320</sup> <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v02/n17/eric-stokes/empress-of-india>

<sup>321</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>322</sup> Ibid, p. 70

<sup>323</sup> Ibid, p. 186

From here on the book diverts to Gandhi's immediate illustrious family—the arrests of her father and grandfather, Motilal Nehru, an affluent lawyer, as a fallout of their increasing involvement in the freedom movement. The next five chapters are devoted to painting an extensive portrait of them, and the rising intensity of anti-colonial sentiments in the 1920s, including the galvanising of support for Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement against British rule. When Jayakar does return to Indira amid these events, in bursts, the portrayal feels simultaneously formulaic and overinflated. For instance, the author reproduces a blatant preoccupation with Nehru (and the family at large), veering from aggrandising Gandhi's grandfather's "fierce energy, a distinguishing mark of the Nehru lineage" or admitting that she hardly remembers Gandhi during their first meeting, being "enraptured" by her father's "heroic ease and grace."<sup>324</sup> A trademark of Gandhi biographies is to depict her in relation to Nehru, and although the later part of Jayakar's book shuns this tendency, here she is commanded by a similar impulse when she writes, "In many ways she was a reflection of her father's mind."<sup>325</sup>

The uncritical valorisation of dynasty politics is, of course, a feature absolutely missing from the Modi biographies, which emphasise his self-made political rise even as they side-line the historical roots of the RSS. However, this text also imbues Gandhi with heroic traits beyond her years, and, as with Modi apocrypha, the author is at pains to glean, from unlikely childhood anecdotes, signs of a future leader's capability leadership and heroism. For instance, describing her as a toddler present at a raid of her family's house, Jayakar writes, "Instinctively, though not sure of what was happening, Indira broke away and charged like a tiger cub towards the police to avert what she thought was a robbery,"<sup>326</sup> following this up with Gandhi's own proclamation that she performed a role as a protector of her family right from the age of three. A motif that

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<sup>324</sup> Jayakar, p. 72

<sup>325</sup> Ibid

<sup>326</sup> Jayakar, p. 20

presents Gandhi as having “a toughness, lacking in most children her age”<sup>327</sup> keeps recurring in the book, including in these very same anthropomorphic terms, as we are told the Indian public was “aware that she could fight like a tigress for the people and the country,”<sup>328</sup> or when a fierce, feral bravery is posited as an equally applaudable alternative to being democratic:

She was no democrat but she loved her country with passion and tenderness. Like a tigress guarding her cubs, her antennae would awake at the slightest threat. She never ceased to regard herself as a guardian of India and its frontiers. Her courage was epic.<sup>329</sup>

Over the course of the book, Jayakar charts her deepening bond with Gandhi and her role as perpetual confidante, becoming, in her telling, someone with whom Gandhi “wished to share of herself. I was there as a friend and perhaps a scribe.”<sup>330</sup> Given this dual role, it is instructive to examine how Jayakar depicts Gandhi in the aftermath of the 1971 war, the Emergency or Operation Blue Star. Of the victory against Pakistan, Jayakar is immensely aggrandising:

The earth reverberated with the roar of the crowd. Throughout the war Indira had drawn the country into herself, girdled it with protection. In her victory she had assumed a mythic role in this country of myth. She had reached those heights which from childhood she had felt were her destiny. The debt she had kept referring to as her earliest memory stood repaid, for her the myth had become reality. Like Charles de Gaulle of France, she could well say: ‘I am India.’

Here Jayakar underscores Gandhi’s adoption of a legendary status, but this is a typical instance of how she also depicts the Indian public as an adulatory monolith gullible to myths, while

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid, p. 48

<sup>328</sup> Ibid, p. 270

<sup>329</sup> Ibid, p. 570

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, p. 302

reinforcing the very myths herself by bringing up Gandhi's fateful "destiny," comparing her to a celebrated military figure who led France against Nazi Germany and framing her as a metonym for India, in echoing the sycophantic phrase coined by the Congress leader DK Barooah, "India is Indira and Indira is India."<sup>331</sup>

When it comes to the Emergency, there are points at which Jayakar writes of being disturbed by the gravity of the political scenario; after its imposition, for instance, she "found Delhi a city of outrage, seething with rumours of arrests, hunger strikes, deaths in jail. Angry friends, aware of my friendship with Indira, came to the house to ask me bluntly what I felt about it all."<sup>332</sup> Yet, despite initially questioning Gandhi in a combative tone during a visit and asking why she had arrested so many people—"How can you, the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, permit this?"<sup>333</sup> Jayakar becomes non-confrontational, writing that "What I had said was enough for the moment." Finally, she says that after 1975, it became increasingly difficult to converse with Gandhi about political matters.<sup>334</sup> In the absence of dialogue, then, Jayakar becomes a sounding board in their dynamic, replacing criticism with reticence, because of her conviction that "I should not ... confront her or force her to view me as a threat. It was also impossible for me to support her. The only way to help was to be silent, to listen, so that she could unburden herself without having to defend herself and her actions."<sup>335</sup>

The act of writing a biography, however, is not a silent one, and as Modi's biographers have done with Godhra, Jayakar constructs Gandhi in sympathetic terms, repeating on several occasions how the latter was pained and disturbed by the Emergency. While the author does disagree with many of Gandhi's political decisions, and often observes her "ruthless"

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<sup>331</sup> Pratinav Anil and Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 227

<sup>332</sup> Jayakar, p. 349

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461

personality<sup>336</sup> or the “growing sycophancy”<sup>337</sup> of those around her, ultimately, she frames Gandhi as constrained by powerful forces beyond her control:

According to most of her friends Indira would not have supported Emergency measures if she had retained her independence; she would have fought the Opposition in the open, on the political battlefield. By now, however, she was hemmed in, surrounded by a growing hysteria; she felt trapped, convinced that plots were being hatched to destroy her ...<sup>338</sup>

Despite Jayakar’s expressing “horror”<sup>339</sup> at planned demolitions of historical buildings (a fallout of the beautification programme), as well as her unequivocal criticism of forcible sterilisation<sup>340</sup> and an awareness of its “worst excesses,”<sup>341</sup> the book distinctly lacks a rigorous description of the circumstances premised on specific figures or analysis. The author does acknowledge that in Delhi, at least, Gandhi’s son Sanjay supervised the family-planning project; but she also replicates bureaucratic obfuscation quintessential to cover-ups of state horrors when she writes, “No one was clear as to who had given the orders. Who was responsible? There was a mindlessness behind the whole operation that was terrifying. It is difficult to assess the exact role Sanjay played.”<sup>342</sup> At some points, Jayakar takes this ambivalence further, attributing much to rumour—“tales so horrendous that I felt they must be exaggerated,” “wild rumours swept through North India, of massive forcible sterilizations ... the rumours invoked mythic fears”—thereby once again furthering the simplistic premise of a nation embroiled in and susceptible to myth.

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<sup>336</sup> Jayakar, p. 233, 256, 315, 541

<sup>337</sup> Ibid, p. 351

<sup>338</sup> Ibid, p. 337

<sup>339</sup> Ibid, p. 374

<sup>340</sup> Ibid, p. 368

<sup>341</sup> Ibid, p. 369

<sup>342</sup> Ibid, p. 375

Of the anti-Sikh pogrom that followed Gandhi's assassination, too, the same twin impulses are at work. She notes hearing of "monstrous"<sup>343</sup> attacks against Sikhs, arson, rape and murder, and that enquiry commissions were futile, since barely any justice was brought against the perpetrators. It is important to note that she had some degree of agency as well, as, for instance, she recounts that even at the height of the pogrom Rajiv Gandhi asked her for guidance and she recommended bringing in the army. Yet, here too, and despite her being so closely enmeshed in the political scenario in this particular instance, the language used is emotive, quivering and righteous— "Blood lust awakened, a deathly essence long suppressed entered the arteries, destroyed oxygen, shrivelled the heart", "When you mortally wound a nation, who is to make atonement?"—but ultimately opaque, since she does not mention Congress leaders' or the police's complicity in the violence, or subject the party to tough scrutiny.

The author, however, is happy to criticise Sanjay in general in the book, describing him as "arrogant," with "a destructive energy that became uncontrollable," and that Gandhi herself "was profoundly disturbed"<sup>344</sup> to eventually learn that programmes such as the sterilisation drive had spun direly "out of control."<sup>345</sup> Crucially, though, Jayakar's criticism of Sanjay appears to rest as well on her own disappointment that he lacked the innate connection with the primordial side of India that she perceives as intrinsic to Gandhi:

nor did he understand the potency of symbol in a mythic society. He had no access to that inwardness which led Jawaharlal and Indira to explore the primal wisdom of India, into millennia of heritage. Sanjay's ears, eyes and heart were closed to India's underground rivers.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Jayakar, p. 584

<sup>344</sup> Ibid, p. 369

<sup>345</sup> Ibid, p. 369

<sup>346</sup> Jayakar, p. 361

The hyperbole and abstractness in this formulation entirely obscure how she arrives this conclusion, but it does serve to emphasise her notion of the forerunners of the dynasty family as being linked, via their own interiority and intuition (and, as we have seen previously in the foreword, their very physicality), to the mythic, primeval nation.

Jayakar's biography does focus a great deal on quotidian aspects as well, noting periods of illness or palpable changes in Gandhi's physique—how she seemed “malnourished,”<sup>347</sup> visibly older<sup>348</sup> or on the verge of tears.<sup>349</sup> Yet, despite this longstanding access to Gandhi's everyday reality, at pivotal moments, political highs or lows, or when describing intimate aspects of her life, the author demonstrates a tendency to immortalise her via ancient legend. She evokes Hindu mythological counterparts most blatantly, perhaps, when she compares Gandhi directly to epic heroes; for instance, she prefaces Gandhi's meeting with the philosopher Krishnamurti with an analogy to a standard right-of-passage in religious epic: “In Indian epics, at a critical moment when immense doubts and conflicts arise in the mind of the Hero, there is a crucial encounter with a Sage .... Indira's meeting with Krishnamurti may be compared with a moment of such mythical intensity.”<sup>350</sup> When describing Gandhi's relationship with Sanjay, as well, she leans first on a national stereotype—the doting Indian mother—and then once again forges parallels with classical epic, in a grandiloquent representation of their dynamic:

At times, seeing the mother and son together, an image from the archaic past of India came to mind ... where the primal woman cradles a baby to her breasts; no consort appears, nor does he seem necessary. In an epic age, Indira could have been Gandhari of the Mahabharata, for, with her clear, penetrating sight and her capacity to see through

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid, p. 390

<sup>348</sup> Ibid, p. 407, p. 435, p. 562

<sup>349</sup> Ibid, p. 297

<sup>350</sup> Ibid, p. 379

people, she turned away her face, chose to be blind, like Gandhari, to the arrogance and wilfulness of her son.<sup>351</sup>

This superimposition, through the book, of Gandhi as mythic character carves a framework within which her entire life becomes inextricable from the timeless national past. This is true of her birth, as we have seen; of the aftermath of autocratic political moves, when she is framed as betraying her own roots in the aeonian nation (during the Emergency, Jayakar wonders how someone who had “placed her hands on the free, ageless soil of India and watered it with her tears” in 1947 could do what she had done<sup>352</sup>); and, fittingly, in death as well, where she returns to the eternal nation, as Jayakar invokes a hymn from ancient Hindu sacred text, the Rig Veda, to write, “She fell to the ageless earth and with her forehead ‘touched yonder sky.’” At the end, she concludes, definitively, that “Epic winds had lifted the story and created a myth of the twentieth century.”<sup>353</sup> What Jayakar leaves out is that one of those winds is biography, an arm of image-making, and her own text contributes to the veritable arsenal of books that sculpt the myth of Gandhi.

In its emphasis on leadership as destiny, retroactive reading of childhood anecdotes as part of a heroic legacy, and lack of uncategorical censure of political activity, Jayakar’s work certainly resembles Modi biographies. Yet, elision or aggrandisement in a biography by a close friend is not surprising. The most critical aspect of Jayakar’s biography, then, is how it strives to centre Gandhi within national allegory and Hindu mythology, effectively remoulding the author’s personal memories into cultural memory and history, and spring-boarding off the figure of

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<sup>351</sup> Jayakar, p. 571-2

<sup>352</sup> Ibid, p. 350

<sup>353</sup> Ibid, p. 594

Gandhi to carve, through her repeated allusions to a myth-hungry public, the nation's "longing and fantasy."<sup>354</sup>

## Conclusion

Battles over history, already in motion in the last century, have taken a number of forms since the Modi government came to power, including the deletion of chapters from school textbooks; censorship of the work of medieval scholars; efforts to prove that today's Hindus are

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<sup>354</sup> Marita Sturken, "Personal Stories and National Meanings," in *The Seductions of Biography*, 31–42.

descendants from the first inhabitants of the land that goes contrary to genetic evidence of migrations pointing to mixed populations; and the widespread assertion that a golden, pre-Islamic period had witnessed immense scientific and technological discoveries, including plastic surgery. Meanwhile, popular history has increasingly revolved around icons, heroes and villains, in both right-wing and Left-nationalist history. An emphasis on the heroic past risks a scenario where history becomes “a biography—or hagiography—of the nation.”<sup>355</sup>

Within this milieu, the popular appeal of heroic biography, though perhaps not widespread enough to be termed a tradition, is visible. By looking at books written to create, promote, reinvent or celebrate the legacies of two prime ministers in twentieth- and twenty-first-century India, I have articulated how biographies can function as cultural memory but also as state-backed projects of forgetting. I argue that two books on Modi, written early into his first term by foreign journalists claiming objective distance, represent efforts to revitalise his political image at the cusp of his rise to national power, while two books from his second term, which saw the permeation of Hindu-nationalist ideology into several aspects of public life in a widespread and aggressive way, burnish and celebrate his mythic status without even the pretence of criticality. This shift reveals that narratives about leaders do mutate, but are also reenacted—for instance, in officious events such as book releases.

I then turn to a biography of Indira Gandhi to examine how it mobilises epic to forge the history of both the leader and the country. Finally, I argue that shifts in the nature of mediation, such as the corporate branding of nations, impacts the constructions of Modi’s political persona, embedding him within a hopeful future of the nation, while in Gandhi’s case there is a leaning back to an ancient past to argue for the leader’s primordial bond to the nation. Despite these differences, there is a striking similarity in how these texts, based on their narration of the

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<sup>355</sup> Tanika Sarkar, “Hinduism, Hindu Nation, and History,” in *Hindu Nationalism in India* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 214–232

leaders' pasts and construction of their personas, interlink their trajectories with the nation's aspirations and self-image.

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