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# 'My countrymen have never disappointed me': Politics of service in Modi's speeches during Covid-19

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I study discursive practices of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the pandemic, political leadership across the globe had to take tough decisions such as restrictions on the social and personal lives of individuals. This meant addressing concerns over ensuring compliance with these restrictions. I examine how Modi managed these concerns in his communication with the Indian polity over TV and radio broadcasts. I do so in instances where Modi gave specific instructions about following restrictions or other COVID appropriate behaviours. Using discourse analysis, I analyse data from two prominent ways of communicating in the pandemic, Mann Ki Baat and addresses to the nation. Analyses show that Modi developed two sets of non-electoral relations across his communication, which treated compliance as normatively expected: a) between Modi and Indians and b) among Indians themselves. These relations made way for treating audiences as those who are in specific social roles where duty and service were normative. Instructions and their compliance were embedded in these roles and treated as expected and consequently moral acts. Modi's discursive practices worked to perform a politics of service and duty, where compliance is ultimately treated as expected service.

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## 1. Introduction

The first few cases of COVID-19 were reported to the World Health Organization by China on December 31, 2019. Although identified at that time as pneumonia of unknown viral etiology, the virus causing the illness has since been identified as SARS-CoV-2. Soon after the first few cases, countries across the globe reported cases of COVID-19 leading the World Health Organization to declare COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Similar to initial responses to other pandemics or epidemics, initial responses to COVID-19 were primarily epidemiological, in so far as these addressed concerns over spread. For individuals and communities this implied complying with a range of restrictions on their movements and other tasks. Implementing these restrictions required able leadership. Indeed, the WHO Director-General Dr Ghebreyesus, in the speech where he declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, also nominated political leadership as key to safeguarding public health (WHO, 2020). In this paper, I examine one aspect of political leadership that was at the core of many actions taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – addressing compliance. I examine how political leadership engaged with compliance in

the case of Union of India.

India reported its first case on January 30, 2020. Increasing numbers of cases were being reported from mid-March. To date in India, the reported deaths due to COVID-19 are 5,12,281 and excess deaths are estimated to be around 1,285,240, with 41,952,712 total cases since the pandemic began. On March 24, 2020, the Union Government of India declared a nation-wide lockdown in response to rising cases of COVID-19. From mid-June 2020, the Government treated this 'first wave' as abating, with gradual lifting of restrictions. In response to a 'second wave' in 2021 however, the Union Government did not impose a nation-wide lockdown. There were other forms of restrictions on social and personal lives. Alongside lockdowns, the Union and State Governments implemented a range of measures in the dedicated program of '#IndiaFightsCorona - COVID-19'.

Political leadership was particularly important in managing the COVID-19 pandemic since social measures, under the rubric of 'COVID appropriate behaviours', were the first line of defence until any medical interventions, such as vaccinations were available. In response to a pandemic such as this, political leadership is faced with two challenges: first is to take decisions that imposed restrictions on the polity in ways that could well be detrimental to many individuals and groups. Researchers have identified how trust in

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the national political leadership can promote compliance (Ezeibe et al, 2020; Faulkner, 2021). However, protests and anti-mask movements in several nations suggest that securing compliance is not an easy task (Faulkner, 2021; Favero & Pedersen, 2020; France 24, 2021). Second, an equally significant task is to communicate these decisions. In particular, decisions that involved compliance with the state-imposed restrictions required careful framing (Hunt, 2021). For instance, Wodak (2021) shows that political leaders in Europe framed the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that resonated with long cherished regional ideals in legitimizing these restrictive measures. In the present paper then, I examine similar discursive practices in the case of Union of India. I examine practices of India's Prime Minister Narendra Damodardas Modi (Modi from hereon) in speeches that addressed concerns over compliance with COVID-appropriate behaviours<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. The pandemic and political discourse

Discursive researchers show that politicians use several linguistic, discursive, and rhetorical practices to legitimize various forms of actions (Chilton et al., 2002; Van Dijk, 1998). Wodak's (2021) study on European political leaders' framing of the COVID-19 pandemic, mentioned above, focuses on discursive practices of framing the pandemic and responses to it. Wodak (2021) draws attention to the use of four discursive frames: religious resurrection, dialogue, trust, and war. For Wodak (2021) these frames are 'typical patterns and characteristics' (p. 336) of political discourses and significantly, were embedded in 'nativist and nationalistic rhetoric'. It is noteworthy then that those restrictions were not merely framed in terms of health and illness, but implicated specific relations between individual themselves or individuals and a nation. Wodak argues that frames such as this are ways of dealing with anxieties about death. At the same time, these also develop specific forms of biopolitics.

In other contexts, researchers similarly show that other ways of discursively making sense of the pandemic involve political threads. Rohela et al (2020) show the use of 'war metaphor' in political and media discourse in India. Metaphors are powerful linguistic and rhetorical devices that define what is real and at the same time exclude what is not (Charteris-Black, 2014; Lakoff & Johnson, 2002). The use of metaphors can then promote and hide different ideologies (Van Leeuwen, 2018). Rohela et al (2020) do identify several problems with the use of the war metaphor, prominent among which is the short-sightedness of responses to COVID-19. Martinez-Brawley and Gualda (2020) show the pervasive use of war metaphor in Spain and the US. Other researchers identify the use of 'nation as a family' metaphor during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hunt (2021) examines the use of the 'family metaphor' by South African President Cyril Ramphosa during the COVID-19 pandemic to legitimize the imposition of lockdowns and other measures. Wodak (2021) shows similar uses of the family metaphor in the Austrian context during the COVID-19 pandemic in ways to legitimize the rules and restrictions imposed. Frames and metaphors identified above then are not merely opportune linguistic devices, but carry with them inferences about leadership, coordination, appropriateness of responses, and rejections of alternatives. The political significance of these comes from their use by political spokespersons in political contexts, like addressing the nation, but also through the ideologies effected through these frames and metaphors.

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, this will refer to a range of social and personal behaviours that individuals were asked to adopt: personal hygiene, social distancing, mask wearing, staying at home, restrictions of mobility and public gatherings, and so on.

For researchers, who examine discourse of politics, the practices of communicating are central to the ideological effects of the use of metaphors and frames (Cammaerts, 2012). Researchers show that political discourse is mediated in ways that shape and frame the message and the audiences (see research collections in: Ekström & Firmstone, 2017; Partington & Taylor 2018). A relevant finding from such research studies is that political discourse cannot be studied in isolation to the medium of its communication. The importance of media is primarily for the possibility for the communication to reach large and specific groups of audiences. In addition, different media themselves promote distinct forms of discursive practices (Bennett & Entman, 2001). An outcome then is that political discourse is not merely that which is designed for reception by public, but also shaped by and shapes media (Fetzer, 2013). Features of contemporary media add another layer of complexity, since distinctions between these platforms can become blurred – since content generated in one medium is readily made available and accessed via other media. Indeed Rai (2019) shows that Modi's speeches are designed to be consumed across different media. For communication that purportedly address a wider polity then, a more relevant concern is around features of those being addressed.

## 3. Political discourse and audiences

It is by no means news that a substantial aspect of mediated political discourse is about the 'people', 'polity', or 'citizens'. On the one hand, research shows that references to such vague groups or entities allows for justifying various political actions (Peters & Witschge, 2015; van Dijk, 2007). On the other hand, researchers make the argument that such entities themselves do not pre-exist the very political discourse (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015; Coleman & Ross, 2010). Constructions of these entities are then to be examined for how these are accomplished and their uses in specific occasions.

Examination of constructions of the polity or audience point to an important practice for politics, namely constructions that develop relations between the political leader and the wider polity (Mazzoleni, 2017). Political speakers might construct common group membership with those ostensibly being addressed or construct them as agents of action seeking to mobilize them (Condor, Tileagă & Billig, 2013). A common practice is the use of pronouns that show alignment or distancing of political spokespersons from these groups. De Fina (1995) argues that pronoun usage by political leaders can offer distinct inferences about how inclusive the leader is in relation to those being referred. Deriving from the work of Goffman (1981) on footing and the implications of taking differing stances with respect to what is being said, De Fina (1995) shows that the use of different pronouns works to flexibly align the speaker with the interests of different groups. She notes that the use of self-inclusive pronouns, such as 'we' and 'us' along with the absence of the singular 'I', in speeches of an Indian peasant organization leader in Mexico, work to legitimize the group, instead of the political leader, as political actor(s). In contrast, the use of singular 'I' is routinely used to offer evaluations and opinions, rather than to indicate inclusion or solidarity with groups. Wodak and van Dijk (2000) show that pronouns such as 'we' and 'they' can work to construct a distinct 'other' who is unrelated to the speaker.

Another notable practice is the use of membership categories. Sacks (1995) demonstrated that the use of membership categories, like 'leader', 'citizen', or 'young', are means of sense-making of and accomplishing social action. This is because the use of these categories offers inferences about known-in-common features associated with these categories. The features can be about

normatively associated activities, rights and entitlements, or relations. A prominent feature of membership categories then is that these derive from membership categorization devices (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015). Categories such as 'mother', 'brother', and 'daughter', are collected together by the device 'family', where mutual expectations of activities and entitlements are informed by culturally salient kinship relations. In political discourse, it is expected that devices of governance and democracy can collect categories of 'Prime Minister', 'elected leader', and 'citizen' in ways so that normative relations of accountability and responsibility can be mobilized (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009). The normativity also makes way for moral character of the relations and expectations, since a breach of these normative duties is open to complaints (Jayyusi, 1984).

For political spokespersons these categorizations provide unique possibilities for implicating differing relations with social groups in ways that serve their own political projects. Again, pronouns – 'we', 'they', and 'our' – provide useful resources (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009). LeCouteur et al. (2001) demonstrate that membership categories used by political actors in combination with pronouns enable flexible alignment with different groups to accomplish specific political ends. Their examination showed that Australian parliamentarians developed categorizations of themselves and Aboriginal peoples of Australia in ways to align themselves with the former or the wider national group of Australians in managing their support for controversial land policies. In taking-up these positions vis-à-vis audiences or others, political leaders present themselves as those who are in specific forms of leadership positions.

A similar note is voiced by political scientists. Chakravarty & Roy (2015) make a pertinent observation that the followers or enemies of political leaders or indeed other such groups do not exist *a priori* (p. 312). Rather these are constructed by political leaders in and through their discursive practices. The role of such sets of individuals either as intended or unintended audiences, or the ultimate targets of leaders' discourses is of core concern in analyses of populism (Mazzoleni, 2007). In India political leaders have routinely made references to 'aam admi' (common man) as facing up to political elite in regional populist politics (Roy, 2014). This allows leaders to position themselves as aligned with the 'common man' in their resistance to elite politics, rather than as a politician doing politics. Discursive practices of alignment with 'the people' and opposition to 'others' were central to Modi's politics and continued to inform his political discourse in the pandemic. Indeed, major announcements about the lockdown, such as its imposition, extension, and removal were all communicated by public announcements broadcast on TV and radio. These preceded official communications, which outlined specific rules and conditions. Modi's political communication via media is then central to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4. Modi, populism, and the pandemic

Modi was twice elected as India's Prime Minister and both times with a notable majority. His political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party), have over the last 8 years secured majorities in various states in India. Recent surveys suggest that Modi continues to enjoy strong approval ratings in India (Ghosh, 2021). Alongside explanations based in ethno-religious populism (Sinha, 2021; Vajpeyi, 2020), scholars identify the role of performative mediated populism in the form of Modi's use of various media platforms in developing and marketing his image (Rai, 2019; Rodriguez & Niemann, 2019; Ward, 2014).

Rai (2019) shows that Modi was the first political leader in India to use media in combination with marketing and branding at a

national level. For instance, Modi would use holographic projections of himself during political campaigns. Alongside this, he purportedly used hired 'trolls' to manage his brand image on social media (Rai, 2019). Rodriguez and Niemann (2019) show that Modi used social media to bypass broadcast news media, which might involve questions around policy, implementation, and outcomes. The authors argue that this demonstrates Modi's abilities to prioritize political gains over constraints and affordances of broadcast media.

Simultaneously, broadcast news media have conceded to Modi's politicking. Ward (2015) shows that Modi received disproportionately more coverage than other political leaders in the 2014 general elections. Chakravarty and Roy (2015) show how media and political institutions in India come together in developing novel networks that Modi has been able to exploit. They argue that the 2014 general elections could well be named 'mediated elections' where the political theatre was continuously conveyed to nationwide audiences via broadcast news media. Bal (2020) makes the provocative argument that increasingly broadcast news media is a loyal echo-chamber for the BJP Government and Modi, with little by way of questions or critical reporting (also see: Rai, 2019).

Notwithstanding the acquiescence of mainstream broadcast news media, a notable element in Modi's oeuvre is his personal communication via nationwide broadcast programs over the radio or India's national television network, Doordarshan. Modi started a monthly program, Mann Ki Baat (loosely, 'Speaking my Heart') in October 2014 on All India Radio, where he speaks about policies, visions for the country, opposition, and a range of other matters. Further, Modi addresses recipients as 'Friends' or 'countrymen', a practice among others, which Bhaishya (2015) argues allows Modi to execute soft power (van Dijk, 1993). Bajpai (2021) makes two pertinent observations about Mann Ki Baat: first, she shows that the revival of a radio program in the contemporary times allows for synchronous listening and a distal asynchronous participation through 'forwarding' or 'liking' on other media platforms. Second, she demonstrates that Modi's Mann Ki Baat establishes Modi as a sentimental leader who deeply cares about the Indian public. Together, Modi establishes a 'new public intimacy' (p.124) in and through a ritualistic performance. Several research papers from within India are exceedingly favourable of Mann Ki Baat (Gandhi & Balamurugan, 2017; Sharma & Dubey, 2021). Kaur and Mishra (2020) in a corpus analyses of Mann Ki Baat programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, offer a highly praiseworthy evaluation of Modi's communication. This is interesting to note in the face of severe criticisms of how Modi managed the pandemic.

While many of these criticisms have come in the context of the severity of the second wave (March 2021-August 2021), initial criticisms pointed to the delayed response to the pandemic and ignoring scientific input (Ghoshal and Das, 2021). More severe criticisms were about India's structural preparedness in dealing with a lockdown (Krishnan, 2020). For instance, the first lockdown (25 March 2020) was announced with a few hours warning leaving the public unprepared. India's internal migrant workers were the worst affected with over 10 million workers having to leave urban places with no public transportation, which resulted in around 200 deaths during their travel (Yadav, 2020). In contrast, Modi was praised for the handling of the first wave, through imposing an early lockdown for example (Sikander, 2021). While it is unclear if this is the reason, but India did report fewer cases and deaths than what was anticipated (Frayer, 2021).

However, extreme death and suffering in the second wave, with an estimated 300,000 deaths between May and September 2021 (Rukmini, 2021), is widely attributed to Modi government's mismanagement. This has involved references to the lack of preparation after the first wave, which resulted in severe shortage of supply of oxygen and other medical facilities during the second

wave (Choudhary, 2021), easing of restrictions, holding outdoor political campaigning and religious festivals, and exporting vaccines to other countries (Ganguly, 2021). The BJP government routinely denied any mismanagement (John, 2021). Government spokespersons dismissed opposition parties' claims and instead held them responsible for spreading misinformation (Joy, 2021). Critics on social media and elsewhere were targeted legally, through changing internet regulation laws that restricted platforms like Twitter from hosting critical content, or by trolls (Ghaffary, 2021). The Modi government launched a 'positivity drive' to address these criticisms and offer a more favourable view of the pandemic situation (John, 2021). It is in this rhetorical space that Modi's own communication must be studied. For Modi then, the issues are not merely about communicating COVID-19 related instructions, but also managing concerns over his own political leadership and wider politics. Modi's communication about compliance becomes important in this light, since the discourses that are part of this communication can offer specific roles to Modi himself, the government, wider polity, and how Modi relates to the Indian polity.

## 5. The present study

The present study examines how compliance with COVID-appropriate behaviours was a concern for Modi in his political discourse. Rather than examine which factors promote or suppress compliance (Ezeibe et al., 2020; Liekefett & Becjer, 2021), the present analysis focuses on how Modi oriented to and dealt with compliance as a concern in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, in his communication with the Indian audiences. To do so, it focuses on Modi's communication about instructions around the COVID appropriate behaviours, vaccination, and other forms of activities proposed to manage the pandemic. Constructions of Modi and the audiences in terms of electoral relations will bring up expectations of activities and entitlements normatively associated with a government and its citizens/residents. These assumptions can be about the role of the government, such as to provide for the public, and the rights and entitlements of citizens/constituents, such as those of freedom and recourse to due processes of law. Similarly, giving and following instructions are expected aspects of relations between a government and its citizens.

Alternative constructions of political leaders and other groups can develop forms of relations that are not based on social arrangements other than electoral relations. Hunt (2021), in this special issue, shows that the President of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa uses metaphors of family in treating the relations between himself and the public as one that is based on a kinship than a political relation. Hunt (2021) argues that this allows him to maintain legitimacy and credibility in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic. In the present paper, I extend current research knowledge on discursive practices of political leaders through a dedicated focus on how relations between the political leader and the audience are constructed to effect specific outcomes in the COVID-19 pandemic. As researchers discussed above note, Modi is known to develop alternative forms of communication with the audiences, which embed various forms of relations between himself and his audiences. I then specifically ask what forms of relations were developed and used by Modi in managing concerns over compliance with COVID-19 appropriate behaviours.

## 6. Method

This paper takes a discourse analytic approach to examine broadcast speeches of Modi that focus on addressing issues of com-

pliance with COVID appropriate behaviours in India during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 6.1. Data and participants

The data for this paper come from naturally occurring political discourse, in line with much of discourse analytic work. Political communication in the form of broadcast speeches of Prime Minister Modi were retrieved online for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic where restrictions were relevant: from 01 March 2020 to 31 August 2021. Speeches were accessed from official sources of the Indian government, namely the website [primeminister.gov.in](http://primeminister.gov.in). Modi's public communication was in two forms: one is the speeches and addresses to the nation broadcast on national and other TV networks, and the second is the monthly radio program Mann Ki Baat through which he addresses the Indian public. Both sets of data for within the above stated period constituted the corpus for this study: 35 media speeches and 18 Mann Ki Baat episodes. Speeches lasted between 20 and 48 min and were in Hindi-English, with one speech fully in English. Mann Ki Baat episodes lasted between 38 and 50 min and were all in Hindi-English.

### 6.2. Coding

In line with the focus of the study, I focused on those instances where Modi offered instructions and guidance on the COVID-19 pandemic. To do this, I thoroughly read and watched the official transcripts and the videos several times. The discursive practices of giving instructions also involved talk about the recipients of these instructions. Together then, instances in these data where Modi was giving instructions and references to Indian people in the context of the receiving instructions about the COVID-19 pandemic were coded in the corpus. Coding was done at the utterance level. In the absence of recipients' orientation that treats whether an utterance was instruction-giving or merely advising, I coded all instances where action taking was the focus. As a result, a data set comprising of 78 instances was developed. This set involved instances where instructions were directed at 'Indians', a broader 'we', and specific groups of Indians, such as 'youth' or 'farmers'. These instances were either accessed through the official transcripts provided (62) or where unclear were transcribed verbatim (16) to be prepared for analysis. As official transcripts these are unique social objects that are produced and edited for consumption by the public as part of institutional communication. However, the present purposes are to examine discursive practices of constructing Modi, Indian polity, and their relationship that made way for addressing compliance with actions during the pandemic. As such, the analysis did not differentiate between institutional and author-generated transcripts.

### 6.3. Analytic procedure

The data were analyzed using techniques of constructionist discourse analysis (Billig; 1991; Condor et al., 2013; McKinlay & McVittie, 2008) as relevant for mediated political discourse. This approach is derived from a social constructionist turn in social sciences (Billig, 1991; Edwards & Potter, 1995; Hepburn, 2005; Potter, 1996), according to which our social world is variously constructed in our social interactions. These constructions are made in and through discourse to address ongoing social action. Researchers undertake a close and systematic analysis of discourses to identify how and what social actions are accomplished. This approach admits both, a broader appreciation of social and discursive context and more micro-approaches that focus on membership categories and talk-in-interaction (Sacks, 1995). For the present paper, the approach has three procedural elements.

First, the descriptions are examined for constructions. I identify and examine descriptions where specific versions of Modi, the Indian polity, and the relations between them were constructed. I focused on the use of pronouns, descriptions of the type of agents Modi and Indians are, and the forms of relations between them. I concentrate on the use of specific pronouns ('I', 'we', 'our' and so on) for the footing-shifts (De Fina, 1995; Goffman, 1981) and the outcomes of these for the relations between Modi and the groups being referred to. I examine these relations in terms of reciprocity of duties and obligations in terms of the categorizations made of the Indian polity as those who are the recipients of these instructions. For this, I use techniques of membership categorization analysis (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015), where the focus is on categorization of individuals as members in categories to mobilize the known-in-common features of these categories (Sacks, 1995). I examine forms of relations that were constructed by Modi through categorizing himself, the audience members, and the wider Indian polity. I then examine how compliance was managed through inferences arising from the normative relations between these categories of individuals.

Second, I examine these discursive features and their outcomes as ultimately rhetorical in focusing on the role of generic overhearers of these speeches. I treat these speeches as made not only for any one section of the Indian audience, but for any direct or indirect (such as this researcher and those who will read this paper) potential audiences. This means, I consider the rhetorical political space of criticisms from the opposition parties, scholars and commentators, and some sections of the media. I treat Modi's discursive practices as rhetorical actions (Billig, 1991; Condor et al., 2013) that offer competing versions of agents, events, and actions to other versions, in addressing the issue of compliance.

Third, I consider the mediated aspect of these speeches. I consider how the speeches and Mann Ki Baat are routinized aspects of Modi's communication with the Indian public, in treating these as direct communications with the Indian public and bypassing news media (Bajpai, 2021). A significant focus of the analysis is on the forms of leadership accomplished in and through these acts of political communication (Bajpai, 2021; Chakravarty & Roy, 2015; Van Dijk, 2006). Overall then, the speeches were analyzed for how specific versions of Modi, audience-citizens, and the relations between them were developed and used in addressing issues of compliance with the instructions given by Modi, alongside Modi's own politics.

## 7. Results

The analysis examined how the issue of compliance was addressed in instances where Modi's speeches were giving instructions to the Indian public. Results show that Modi addressed issues of compliance by constructing two types of relations: first, are non-electoral forms of relations between himself and the audience. These relations offered the inference that compliance was presumed and expected. Second, Modi offers these instructions as arising from specific forms of normative relations between groups of Indians as members of a nation. Below, I examine extracts that demonstrate these two aspects.

### 7.1. Modi and audiences

In Extracts 1, 2, and 3, Modi develops relations between himself and audiences, in ways that are different to that of between an elected representative and the electorate. These relations are developed in the process of making specific requests from the public in broadcast speeches.

Extract 1 comes from Modi's first public speech about restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, transcribed verbatim by the author (a non-verbatim transcription follows below). This was broadcast live on March 19, 2020. In this speech Modi had imposed a 14-hour curfew in India from 7am to 9 pm on March 22, called 'janata curfew', characterized as a curfew of the people and by the people.

### 7.2. Extract 1

- 
- 1 Friends whenever I asked anything of you my countrymen
  - 2 have never disappointed me (.) the strength of your
  - 3 blessings is that all of us together us are moving forward
  - 4 towards chosen targets within us (.) our efforts are
  - 5 reaching success too (.) today to all you countrymen a total
  - 6 130 crore countrymen I want to ask something I have come
  - 7 I want a few of your coming weeks (.) I want some of your
- coming time (.) my dear countrymen to date science has not been able to develop a certain solution to the Corona pandemic nor is there any vaccine yet (.) in this situation everyone is concerned which is quite natural
- 

Extract 1 – non-verbatim transcript.

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Friends, whenever I asked you for something, you have never let me down. Our efforts succeed, only on the strength of your blessings. Today, I am here to ask you, all my fellow citizens, for something. I want your coming few weeks from you, your time in the near future. Friends, till now, science has not been able to find a definite solution to save us from the Corona pandemic, neither has a vaccine been developed. In such a situation, it is very natural to get worried.

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Above, Modi develops relations between himself and audiences, in ways that treat his instructions as requests of service. First, Modi uses the address terms (Jaworski & Galasiński, 2000) 'Friends' and 'countrymen' (line 1), which do not readily suggest any electoral relation. While the latter is perhaps routine for politicians, it's use along with the second-person pronoun 'you' and the categorization 'my countrymen' (line 1) indicate an active categorization by Modi of the audiences as co-members with himself in the national group. The address term 'Friends' is distinctly informal but is routine for Modi in his speeches (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015). It is notable that the content is designed in ways to set-up a probable acceptance of his request from recipients who might be familiar. There is then a tension between Modi as the prime minister addressing the electorate and the informality of his speech.

Second, a relation between Modi and these 'countrymen', is made available in the following description: 'whenever I asked anything of you my countrymen have never disappointed me'. The pronouns 'I' and 'you/your' make it clear that the present matters concern Modi as an individual and the audiences as recipients of this request. Irrespective of possibilities for the truthfulness of this claim, the extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) 'asked anything of you' and 'never disappointed me' (line 1), treat it as routine that Indians willfully oblige Modi's requests. This is noteworthy since it removes the necessity for the use of State resources in ensuring that the instructions of the government are indeed observed. Modi treats compliance as assumed and as an outcome of the unspecified relation between himself and audience-

citizens. This is furthered through claims that Indians' 'blessings' on Modi have contributed to favourable outcomes.

Third, Modi frames his request as about taking over their 'time'. The request is preceded by a pre-request (Fox, 2015) – 'I want to ask something' – that presents him as in a position where he cannot readily give orders (Clift, 2016). While this form of pre-request is routine for interactions where the requesting party does not see themselves as possessing rights to make such requests (such as children asking their parents; or those in junior positions asking their immediate seniors), in doing this here, Modi acts *as if* there is a gradient between himself and the audience-citizens where he cannot directly make claims on them, despite his position as the Prime Minister of the country. In presenting his instructions in this way, Modi frames the act of following instructions as an act of service that Indians have to grant him. This is a notably distinct form of framing instructions about following restrictions.

Together then, Modi's earlier framing of the relation between himself and Indians, in non-institutional ways, and requesting the audience from a downgraded position make way for treating the instructions and possibly following these instructions as occurring in contexts of sacrifice and service. Notably, it minimizes possibilities for seeing Modi as 'imposing' restrictions on Indians. This way of characterizing instructions at the beginning of the pandemic then sets-up a frame for possible oncoming instructions in the future. In the extracts below, similar features are seen to varying degrees. In Extract 2, Modi develops a kinship relation with Indians in offering specific instructions about following lockdown restrictions.

### 7.3. Extract 2

Extract 2 comes from the transcript of Mann Ki Baat broadcast on April 24, 2020. By the end of April 2020, India reported a total of approximately 34,000 cases and 1,200 deaths (Worldometer, 2021).

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1 My dear countrymen, in the midst of this pandemic, as a  
 2 member of your family, and all of you happen to be my  
 3 family members, it is also my responsibility to touch upon  
 4 certain points and offer some suggestions. To my  
 5 countrymen, I urge, let us not at all get caught in the trap of  
 6 over-confidence, let us not harbor a feeling that if corona  
 has not yet reached our city, our village, our street or our  
 office, it is not going to reach now. See! Never make such a  
 mistake!

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Above, Modi presents himself as a 'family member' in delivering specific instructions framed as requests. Modi at lines 1–3, develops a reciprocal relation between himself and the audience, which is that of being family members. The use of extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) – 'all of you' – in developing this claim of kinship relations, addresses how it is that any of the audience members could be his family members. Even if a few of the audience members are his family, others are unlikely to be. The extreme case formulation offers an alternative, which is that the relation between Modi and the audiences, irrespective who they are, is one of kinship. This is notably distinct to normative understandings of family where individuals are related to each other, through kinship relations of 'daughter', 'aunt', 'sister-in-law' and so on (Sacks, 1995).

Throughout, Modi develops his affiliation with audiences through pronouns 'I', 'us' and 'our'. These pronouns not only indicate his inclusion in the group along with the audiences, but also that the issues and concerns for them are shared by him. It is noteworthy that Modi treats this to mean that he normatively owes a

responsibility to the audience in the form of 'certain points' and 'some suggestions', which are to be given. While being in a relation of kinship might offer several implications, Modi takes up the one about 'being responsible' for the audience. Again, this is an alternative form of responsibility to that of being in a governing position that Modi is normatively expected to fulfil as an elected member (see Hunt, 2021). In so doing, Modi treats his position vis-à-vis audience-citizens as that of a 'caretaker' with responsibilities to his kin and who will instruct them about appropriate behaviours. While the recipients may not receive these in this way, this serves as a means to rhetorically set-up future claims about how Modi has acted in the spirit of a responsible family member (Billig, 1991).

It is noteworthy that these suggestions are not problematic in so far as these refer to assumptions of 'over-confidence'. Rather these suggestions deal with taking precautions about the possible spread of COVID-19. In framing these suggestions as those that are being given among family members and the act of making these suggestions as a 'responsibility', Modi eschews the view that his oncoming instructions are government mandates. Rather, he forwards the inference that these are acts of care that family members can mutually expect. In this way, Modi presents himself as acting in the interests of Indians as not an elected official, but as someone who cares in ways similar to that of a family member.

### 7.4. Extract 3

In Extract 3, Modi employs a similar frame of being a family member with audiences. Extract 3 comes from the transcript of a video titled 'PM Modi addresses the nation' broadcast on April 14, 2020.

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1 If we cannot handle the next 21 days then the country and  
 2 your family will go back 21 years if these 21 days we  
 3 cannot manage them your family forever and ever can get  
 4 destroyed and I say this not as a Prime Minister but as a  
 member of your family (.) so forget what it means to go out  
 for these days

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In Extract 3, Modi similarly foregrounds an alternative relation to that of between an elected official and resident/citizen. Here, this is done to make an appeal towards effective adherence to the lockdown. Modi describes the possible consequences of not adhering to the lockdown in severe terms: 'country and your family will go back 21 years'; 'family forever and ever can get destroyed'. Both these descriptions indicate severe problems in case the lockdown is not adhered to. Notably, these treat family as the unit for which problems and concerns apply.

Rather than point to possible issues for individuals, Modi frames the consequences in terms of broader units: family and country. In so doing, he makes relevant that family is a meaningful frame for conveying the seriousness of the lockdown and by extension the pandemic. In that, his instructions are framed in ways to treat individuals as responsible agents for their own kinship relations. Further, the inclusion pronoun 'we' treats these consequences as applicable to audiences and himself. In that, he is just as responsible as audience members might be towards their own relations.

It is here that Modi introduces himself in ways alternative to that of an elected official: 'not as a Prime Minister but as a family member' (line 3). Specifically, Modi presents his use of the descriptions of problems with not adhering to the lockdown as arising from his position as a fellow family member. Doing this downgrades the possible inference that this is a threat to audiences and confers a sense of concern arising from being a fellow family member. Modi uses this positioning to mirror the responsibility

that he takes-up as a fellow family member. Below, Modi similarly treats individual audience members as members in specific categories who are in normatively expected relations with other audience members to manage issues with compliance.

### 7.5. Relations among audiences

In the extracts in this section, Modi frames the instructions for COVID-appropriate behaviours in terms of normative relations that exist among audiences themselves. A notable aspect of the extracts in this section is that the pronoun use imposes a distance between Modi and audiences. Here, Modi directs audiences to undertake specific tasks and follow instructions.

#### 7.6. Extract 4

Extract 4 was taken from the Mann Ki Baat episode broadcast on June 28, 2020. At this time, India reported approximately, 585,792 total cases and 17,000 deaths ([Worldometer, 2021](#)).

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1 Friends, during the unlock period, we have to stay more  
 2 vigilant compared to the lockdown period. Only your  
 3 alertness can save you from corona. Always, remember, if  
 4 you do not wear a mask, do not observe the two-yard  
 5 social distancing norms or do not take other precautions,  
 6 you are putting others at risk besides yourselves, especially  
 the elderly and children at home. Hence, I urge all  
 countrymen...and I repeatedly do so...do not be  
 negligent...take care of yourselves and others too.

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In Extract 4, Modi frames adherence to COVID-appropriate behaviours as morally valuable. Here, Modi does not instruct audiences directly. Rather, these are framed in 'if you do not do X, then...' formulations which treat problematic outcomes as inevitable if these behaviours are not adhered to. Notably, the outcomes are described in terms of problems not just for individual audience members, but for 'elderly and 'children at home' (line 5). These categories are noteworthy since these are readily hearable as those who are vulnerable. By implication, Modi positions the audiences as those who are less vulnerable and are possibly in breach of following those behaviours. In so doing, Modi develops a particular position for those who are to directly receive these instructions or primary audiences: those who occupy positions of less vulnerability and can take charge – 'you are putting' (line 4). Modi does not treat himself as part of those who are receiving instructions, since these are delivered to others: 'you' and 'yourselves'. This distancing is notable given Extracts 2 and 3, where Modi works to develop commonality of membership. Here, it works to present Modi as giving instructions to achieve specific outcomes.

Identifying these types of agents as primary recipients frames the instructions as duties or service taken by the able for or on behalf of those who are perhaps less so. Modi's subsequent appeal directed to 'all countrymen', treats similar caution as more broadly applicable. Overall, Modi treats following the COVID-appropriate behaviours as a moral responsibility arising from their relations with other family members or Indians. In Extract 5, Modi frames these behaviours as based on normative relations between farmers and other citizens.

#### 7.7. Extract 5

Extract 5 comes from a video titled 'PM's speech at release of 8th instalment of financial benefit under PM-KISAN' broadcast on May 14, 2021. By this time, India was going through the second

wave of the COVID-19 pandemic with a rapid rise in cases. By the end of May 2021, India reported 200,000 new cases per day and around 3000 new deaths per day and a total of 30 million cases and 350,000 deaths ([Worldmeters, 2021](#)).

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1 Friends in today's program I want to country's every  
 2 farmer (.) brothers and sisters who live in villages again  
 3 alert about corona (0.5) this infection has now reached  
 4 villages very rapidly (.) country's all governments are  
 5 working to deal with this in all possible ways (.) in this (.)  
 6 the awareness of people in villages is just as important as  
 7 whatever our panchayat raj related systems that are there  
 8 (.) their cooperation and consultation are just as necessary  
 9 for our country (.) you have never disappointed the  
 country this time also we have the same expectation (.) to  
 be safe from corona you have to (.) at a personal level at a  
 family level at a community level whatever compulsory  
 steps (.) necessities there are we have to absolutely take  
 them

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In Extract 5, Modi develops specific relations between the wider Indian citizenry, and those who are the more direct audiences to this part of his speech, variously described as 'farmer' (line 1), 'brothers and sisters who live in villages' (lines 1–2), and 'people in villages' (line 4). Modi also describes the efforts and tasks taken by various levels of the Indian government in favourable ways. Described using extreme case formulations ([Pomerantz, 1986](#)) – 'all governments' and 'all possible ways' (line 1) – these efforts are constructed as fully directed at dealing with the pandemic. At the same time, Modi outlines a role for India's residents too. First, Modi presents himself as one among other Indian residents who are in a specific relation with farmers and people in villages, through the pronoun 'we'. This relation is developed through claims about how the latter have 'never disappointed the country' (line 6) and have to meet similar 'expectations' (line 7). These descriptions indicate that Modi and Indians owe a debt of gratitude to farmers and people in villages for their unspecified services, thus far. While the normative relation is not spelled out, Modi treats farmers and people in villages as helping and working for the rest of the country. Notably this again is not a relation embedded in the civic constitution of India. Rather, this mutuality is based on normative understandings of 'farmers' and 'people in villages', such as that they provide for the sustenance of 'rest of the country'. This frames the current instructions for following COVID-appropriate behaviours as similar normative duties that farmers and people in villages will take-up in relation to fellow Indian citizens. The selection and use of 'farmers' in this way, as those who provide for Indians rather than any other possible attributes of farmers, renders the instructions given to them as based in service.

#### 7.8. Extract 6

In Extract 6, Modi instructs youth to take-up a range of tasks ostensibly in the interests of themselves and the nation. However, these tasks coincide with issues of vaccine availability. This extract comes from a speech broadcast live on April 8, 2021, where Modi is instructing Chief Ministers of various states in India about the pandemic. At this time, there were concerns with vaccine availability in India and especially for those between the ages of 18–45. This speech then potentially offers alternative means of dealing with vaccine shortages ([PTI, 2021](#)).



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1 I will also exhort the country's youth that that they  
 2 should help those who are over 45 years around them to  
 3 get their vaccine (.) and I have a unique appeal to the  
 4 youth that you are healthy you are capable and you can  
 5 do a lot of things (.) but if my country's young man  
 6 follows the SOPs of corona and protocols like maintaining  
 7 distance or wearing masks (.) if my country's youth  
 8 follows them then corona has no power that it can reach  
 9 near my country's youth (.) first we should impress upon  
 10 the young people to take on these precautions (.) how  
 much we want to pressurize them to take vaccines if we  
 do more convincing about following the protocols if our  
 youth take up this gauntlet then they themselves will  
 follow this protocol and get others to follow as well then  
 see just like we were at the peak and came down we can  
 do the same again

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In Extract 6, Modi gives a series of tasks for 'youth' in India. These are given in the present tense on a broadcast speech and in so doing accomplish the act of performative leadership (Bajpayi, 2021; Chakravarty & Roy, 2015; Van Dijk, 2006). This performance involves, first constructing these tasks as exhortations, appeals, and requests. Second, while these tasks are framed towards 'young persons', these are also part of a broadcast that is seen/heard by several other types of individuals. In doing so, Modi makes it seeable and/or hearable to others the type of relation he has and performs with the 'youth', which relation (see Extract 1) positions him as a requester and the youth as those who are in a position to grant his requests. Third, Modi positions other audiences as those who are to ensure that the youth participate in these actions – 'we should impress upon' (line 6) – including himself. The act of requesting actions from a specific group ('youth'), while giving roles to others, points to possible measures by which to ensure that these actions are indeed carried out. These elements together then, accomplish a performance of leadership for the audiences.

The categorization 'youth' is of interest for two reasons. First, it is used in contrast to another age-related categorization 'over 45 years', in offering a specific task. Modi's description of task is around vaccination for those who are 'over 45'. He characterizes this as an exhortation and that the task involves 'help', which together treat the task as favourable. The categorization 'youth' then treats its members as in a more capable position than those who are 'over 45 years'. In so doing, Modi renders the instructions being given as those that are undertaken in the spirit of service for a wider 'public good'. Second, Modi ascribes to this category, features that are normatively associated with age-related aspects of 'youth' (Sacks, 1995): 'healthy', 'capable' and 'can do a lot of things' (line 3). This set of features are based on age-related differences that are less likely to be negated. Modi's instructions then can be seen as grounded in normative social relations.

Modi's second task is phrased as an 'appeal' to observe COVID appropriate behaviors. While this can be mandated as part of the government's handling of the pandemic, here Modi offers an alternative framing that turns on these features of the 'youth' in ways to suggest that they have 'health on their side'. Modi orients to the broadcasting aspect of this speech in specifically developing a distinction between the youth who will have to be persuaded to take-up these behaviors and others 'we' (line 6). He instructs to this 'we', tasks of persuading and convincing the youth to practice COVID appropriate behaviors.

Modi specifies that these features of the 'youth' when applied to following COVID appropriate behaviors can prevent being infected by the Corona virus, without having to take a vaccine. One rhetorical outcome of this set of instructions is to minimize the impor-

tance of vaccinations for those who are under 45 years of age, in a context where India was facing vaccine shortages. Modi ascribes a favourable outcome to these forms of activities, helping those over 45 years of age to get vaccinated, following COVID appropriate behaviors, and motivating others to do the latter, in terms of lessening the numbers of COVID-19 cases. Again, the specific categorization used in framing relations with fellow Indians, treats the instructions being given to them as those which are undertaken in a spirit of service. For Indians, the instructions being given to Indians are then framed as duties or service that they will have to do rather than obligations routinely expected of citizens of a country.

## 8. Discussion

In this paper, I examined Modi's political discourse about compliance with COVID appropriate and other actions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The analysis focused on instances where instructions in dealing with the pandemic were the topics. The analysis examined two sets of practices by which Modi addressed issues of compliance: first, Modi developed relations between himself and the audiences that are different to that between an elected representative and the electorate, and second, developed relations of duty and service among audiences themselves, which offered a normative framework for undertaking the instructions. Together, these provide alternative relations to what can be expected to operate between an elected Prime Minister and the electorate. The alternative is to ground the instructions being given and the expectations to undertake them in a sense of duty or service.

First, Modi gives instructions based on non-electoral relations between himself and Indians. This involves presenting himself as a co-member in family categories, or as in a position that allows for acting with moral responsibility. This of course is notably distinct to the forms of responsibility that an elected representative might enact, such as that of claiming a sense of political duty. While lockdowns were legally enforced by the Union Government's penal and health provision laws, the framing and justification of these in informal ways accomplishes important rhetorical functions. The present practice allows for presenting Modi as having a non-electoral direct relation with the Indian public. This achieves a similar political effect to that where Modi had side stepped broadcast news media and used alternative practices of communicating with the Indian polity (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015). Rhetorical and communicative practices developed relations where Modi is one with the public.

In the present data, using inclusive pronouns, Modi presents himself as part of the polity, which is facing the crisis, and shares their worries or responsibilities for acting. Consider Extracts 3 and 4, where instructions are offered in a framework of family. Modi presents himself as a family member and the audiences themselves as those who have families. Modi then treats the act of giving instructions as arising from a sense of family-bound responsibility or care and frames those receiving instructions in similar terms. For audiences then, the instructions are hearable as acts of care or duty that one normatively expects from family members rather than as acts owed because of shared citizenship. Again, irrespective of how the audience receive it, these discursive practices present Modi as performing specific forms of politics (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015; Rai, 2019; Sinha, 2021).

Second, Modi also offers specific versions of relations among audiences in ways that bring-up normative relations between various groups of Indians. It is normatively expected that 'youth' are healthy and can look out for others (Extract 6), just as the 'elderly and children' (Extract 4) are known to be vulnerable, or that 'farm-

ers' provide sustenance for others (Extract 5). The use of these categories then brings-up normative relations that treat taking up COVID-appropriate actions as unproblematic.

Significantly, the use of these categories implies relations between groups of Indians that make way for mutual entitlement of duties or service. The relations then are not always bearing among citizens. It is this that confers a sense of morality in the following of these instructions (Jayyusi, 1984). Again, in Extracts 4, 5, and 6, Modi's use of pronouns here distance himself from specific groups of audiences, such as the 'youth' or 'farmers', while aligning himself with the broader Indian polity. In so doing, Modi accomplishes voicing concerns and making requests on behalf of the wider polity. Modi's instructions to these other groups then gain legitimacy, since he is now acting as a leader in bringing-up relations between groups of Indians to enable mutual actions.

Research on political discourse shows that persuasion is a core aspect of this discourse (Billig, 1991; van Leeuwen, 2007). Researchers identify a range of practices such as the use of metaphors (Charteris-Black, 2014), frames (Wodak, 2021), or selective pronouns (De Fina, 1995; LeCouter et al., 2001) in accomplishing various forms of persuasion in the audience. The present findings show that another core aspect of political communication can be found in how relations between the political leader and the polity, and among sections of the polity themselves, are constructed. Within these relations certain actions are expected and legitimate, whereas the absence of these can give cause for complaints. The constructions of these relations then serve as vehicles for political actions and outcomes.

Audiences here are not constructed as mere listeners or individual citizens of a democracy. Rather, they are flexibly constructed as those who are in particular relation to Modi or fellow audiences, which normatively admits service, duty, and care. Modi's use of pronouns works to flexibly align himself with those being requested, as one of those needing aid of other citizens, or as one among those who will enable the successful accomplishment of these actions. Through these discursive practices, Modi also positions himself, in relation to Indians, as the agent who is promoting and organizing service or dutiful actions by, among, and for Indians. This construction of himself is then less of an overbearing manager or an imposing figurehead and more of an orchestrator of relations among Indians that make way for service towards each other. Modi then enacts a form of politics where audiences and the wider Indian polity is related to him and each other, in ways other than those based on administrative grammar (cf. Mazzoleni 2007). Modi's obligation to Indian citizens and their return obligations to Modi and fellow citizens are constructed in a grammar of service, duty, and care. The mutuality in operation is then less subject to checks and balances that a constitution might allow. Modi's development of these relations and their situated use contributes to doing politics of service and duty (Bhaisya, 2015).

These constructions of Modi himself, others, and relations are used to develop the view that compliance is unproblematic (cf. Hunt, 2021). Instead, the compliance is attributed to the relation that Modi has with Indian peoples and mutual relations among Indians themselves. This then marks persuasion or compliance itself as the topic than as an outcome of the discourse (Condor et al., 2013; van Leeuwen, 2007). It is important to consider the rhetorical outcomes in constructing compliance as easily achieved in this context.

It is here that the broadcast nature of this type of political discourse and the rhetorical space of the pandemic become relevant. First, these discourses are broadcast live over radio and TV news channels to reach a vast number of Indian audiences. Given the likelihood that, in India, majority of consumption of TV and radio broadcasts happen in family spaces, these discursive practices make way for audiences to identify themselves as family members

or individuals in these groups (youth or farmers), or as those who are in other normative relations with members in those groups within India. Instructions given and to be followed come to be seen as extensions of already present normative relations among Indians, rather than novel actions that are framed as restrictions. The use of normative relations that are available for use by audiences to understand actions achieves the effect of normalizing following the instructions being given (Billig, 1991).

Overall, these constructions and the relations speak to constituting a polity that does not exist as result of constitutional guarantees, but as a national collective bound by mutual expectations and entitlements of service and duty. Modi includes himself in this network of relations as both a co-participant and organized. In his discursive practices, Modi builds a relational nationalism and national polity, within which are embedded instructions and compliance with these instructions.

These findings then speak to wider understandings of how political discourse functions to effect political and rhetorical outcomes. Future research can examine how audiences respond to these categorizations and roles etched out for them by political leaders in contexts where specific actions are expected of them. Researchers can also examine the role of similar or other forms of relations that are used by political leaders to address other pressing issues.

To conclude, the present findings show that Modi frames instructions and possibilities for complying with them in terms of expected national service. Constructions of the leader, the relations between the leader and the audiences, and among audiences themselves developed a sense of mutually owed activities and entitlements based less in civic terms and more in terms of duty and service to each other. Compliance with COVID-appropriate behaviours and government instructions was then embedded in the grammar of social relations grounded in duty and service.

### Data availability

The data used here were obtained from the public domain and are freely available

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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