

To Members of the Selection Committee,

Thank you for taking the time to read the paper. I've written this draft based on my fieldwork in India during the 2024 national elections in June. I was in India from March to July, covering campaign rallies for PM Modi and the Leader of the Opposition Party, Rahul Gandhi. I've provided a comparative perspective of these two leaders' performances during the rallies.

This is the first draft based on the ethnography method, so please make suggestions to improve it. Please email the comments to me - shivani.choudhary@yale.edu

PS—I want to apologize in advance for the long draft. The detailed footnotes have taken up a few pages, so hopefully, it won't feel too long.

Shivani

Following the Political Actors: A Multi-Site Comparative Study of BJP & Congress Campaign Rallies in 2024 Indian Elections

By – Shivani Choudhary

The verdict of the 18th Lok Sabha (National) elections in India, announced on June 4th, 2024, paved the way for the formation of a majority government by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) for the third consecutive time. However, this victory did not match the previous two election results (2014, 2019), and the BJP fell short of the absolute majority mark of 272, winning only 240¹ (36.6% vote share) seats. For the first time after a decade, the BJP must rely on its regional allies² to form a stable coalition³ government. The oppositional INDIA alliance⁴, led under the stewardship of Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi, won 205 seats, with the Indian National Congress (INC) alone nearly doubling its tally from 52 to 99 seats. The return of coalition politics and strong opposition has marked the restoration of Constitutional morality for many. It can be called a step towards '[re-democratization](#)' (Christophe Jaffrelot), a recovery of faith in the abstraction called 'The People'⁵ ([Yogendra Yadav](#)), a production of '[unicorn democracy](#)'⁶ (Ajay Gudavarthy), a rise of '[Mandal Over Mandir](#)'⁷ politics (Sudha Pai),

¹ They won 303 (37.3% vote share) seats in the 2019 elections and 282 (31% of vote share) in the 2014 elections.

² TDP – Telegu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, JD(U) – Janata Dal United in Bihar.

³ Coalition government is when, in a parliamentary system, a single political party alone does not achieve an absolute majority. So, a group of political parties forms an alliance and cooperates with each other to achieve the majority mark and form the government.

⁴ As [Wikipedia](#) states, "The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (I.N.D.I.A.) is a big tent multi-party-political alliance of several political parties in India led by the country's largest opposition party, the Indian National Congress. The alliance is in opposition to the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2024 Indian general elections."

⁵ A note to the politicians that 'the people' are at the '[centre of a democracy](#)' (The Hindu editorial discusses the argument in detail.)

⁶ A term coined by the author meaning a "democracy that has cultural belonging with economic justice, a populist constitutionalism." He further argued that the electorate no longer wants to choose between populist cultural centrality of Modi and social & economic justice narrative of the opposition.

⁷ Mandal politics refers to the politics based on the demand for affirmative action for Other Backward Classes in India. The movement gained momentum in late 1980s and early 1990s after which the Mandal Commission granted 27% reservation to OBCs in public institutions. Typically, Mandal politics is based on the issues of caste whereas the Mandir politics refers to the mobilization of Hindu voters in the name of recent Ram Temple that was built in Ayodhya after the Supreme court gave its verdict on the controversial Babri Masjid case. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta argued, the rejection of the BJP is not a rejection of Hindutva: The building of the temple was popular, and communalism is growing. But the BJP made the mistake of thinking this could transform into political capital indefinitely.

the rise of an assertion that India is not a '[Hindu Rashtra](#)' (Amartya Sen), the 'hubris of one leader has been checked' ([Pratap Bhanu Mehta](#)), and a reminder that "[the Indian elections are simply too big and too local for control by any dictator or party](#)" (Arjun Appadurai).

Once the new government was formed, a debate on the Motion of Thanks⁸ to the President's Address occurred in the parliament. Extracts from this debate below show how the democratic culture of debate, dissent, and opposition has revived in the temple of democracy.

During his speech, the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, while accusing BJP, RSS, and its allies of violence, said⁹, "*Those who call themselves Hindus talk violence... hatred... untruth 24 hours*". The statement led to an uproar in the House.

In defense, PM Narendra Modi rose from his seat from the other side and said, "*This is a very serious issue. Calling the entire Hindu society violent is a serious issue.*"

While the disruptions at the treasury benches continued, Gandhi responded, "*The BJP and the RSS are not the entire Hindu society... Aap Hindu ho hi nahi (You are not Hindus).*" He further confronted Narendra Modi by asking, "*Why is the PM always serious?*"

PM Modi again rose¹⁰ from his seat and said, "*Democracy and the Constitution have taught me that I need to take the Leader of Opposition seriously.*"

This direct, heated confrontation between PM Narendra Modi and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi in the parliament is novel. This is the rare occasion when the PM has risen from his seat to respond to the opposition leaders. It happened only once during the last Lok Sabha (2019 – 2024). Earlier, the PM would never glance towards the opposition side when the house was in session. The BJP had an absolute majority, and the opposition had slim numbers, so ignoring them became the norm for the PM and the sitting MPs of the government. The 2024 election results

⁸ The President addresses the first session of the Parliament after each general election and the first session of every fiscal year. This address of the President, which corresponds to the 'speech from the Throne in Britain,' is discussed in both Houses of Parliament on a motion called the 'Motion of Thanks,' which is moved in each House by ruling party MPs. The discussion on the Motion of Thanks is concluded by the reply of the Prime Minister or any other Minister.

⁹ This statement has been expunged from the official minutes of the house as it was treated as misleading and hurtful to the sentiments of Hindus. The leaders of the ruling party argued that it was crossing the sanctity of the house.

turned those dynamics upside down, where the PM is forced to address every issue raised by the opposition in the house. Rebuttals about the ethnic violence in the state of Manipur, the stampede during a religious event in Hathras, the issue of paper leaks for national-level entrance examinations for the medical field (NEET-UG) and assistant professorship eligibility exam (UGC – NET), the roof collapse of various airports & mismanagement by authorities during monsoon season occur in the background noises of protests and lively sloganeering by opposition leaders, with the slogan ‘Jai Samvidhan’ (Hail the Constitution) echoing in the parliament.

Debate, dissent, and deliberation seem to be re-informing the present state of Indian democracy. Will this lead to the formation of representative and people-centric democracy? Or are these far-fetched aspirations just like a mirage waiting to disappear? The trajectory on which Indian democracy will embark is still unknown. The bigger question is, how the Indian democracy reached this stage after ten years of an absolute majority government by the Narendra Modi-led NDA alliance. This paper finds the answers in 2024 national election through an in-depth comparative analysis of the performances between PM Narendra Modi and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi at the centre stage. How did the performative confrontations between the two supreme leaders during election rallies and roadshows feed into a renewal of deliberative democracy? What codes, symbols, cultural structures, values, political discourses, and material incentives were dominant in the performances of the two leaders? How do campaign rituals, ceremonies, and performances by political actors play a significant role in persuading and influencing their audience? How was fusion created between the political actors, their audience at the rallies, and the electorate at large through these performances?

The paper argues that the electoral campaign witnessed a pivotal shift in audience engagement as voters began to disengage with populist leader Modi’s persona, the actor, and increasingly resonated with Rahul Gandhi’s performative script. Despite initial weaknesses in Gandhi’s campaign mise-en-scene, his performances showed the willingness to challenge Modi’s authoritarian regime and empathize with the people’s struggles, leading to fostering a strong connection with the audience. Hence, as the campaign intensified, Gandhi’s counter-performance effectively reframed the narrative, capitalizing on the public’s growing disillusionment with Modi’s government. Through his performances, he successfully branded himself as a leader of the INDIA alliance, galvanizing a diverse coalition of supporters. As his campaign gained steam,

fueling audience enthusiasm, it started hinting at a shift in voter sentiment that could thwart Modi's ambitions for an absolute majority, marking a notable dent in his dominance. The campaign also became a dialogical ground for performance of democracy, where both leaders tested and revised their scripts in imagination of the other's response. I identified three groups in both sets of rallies and roadshows: The Enchanted: those who fused with the actor, the Disenchanted: those who left the actor but fused with the (newly emergent script), and lastly the Unswayed Clients: those whose allegiance to their local leader was so strong, they voted based on their local leader's choice—in the hope that their patron would keep on providing. In doing so, I show how people can fuse with a different element of a dialogical social performance that is unfolding.

The nitty-gritty of how these performances unfold on the ground requires deeper engagement to decode India's political landscape. My comparative multi-site mobile ethnography, which provides a Geertzian thick description of the election rallies, offers analytical purchase that the pollsters and strategists could not capture through their data. Additionally, my complete immersion and first-hand engagement with the campaign rallies and audience response allowed me to actively interpret the meaning of performances in the electoral battleground rather than coming up with a retrospective interpretation of the performances based on results like the macro-theorists. The Cultural Sociology (CS) theoretical framework equipped me to decode these performances during the electoral campaign in real time.

The paper will unfold in three parts, first beginning with examining the intricate dynamics that precede the political actors' stage appearances which includes the meticulous mobilization of crowds by trained party workers, who work tirelessly to ensure a strong turnout. I will analyze the transformation of a location's aesthetics which plays a crucial role in shaping the mise-en-scene to create a collective effervescence during the ritualistic campaign performance. Next, I will explore the varied responses to rallies, ranging from enthusiasm to indifference.

Second, the focus will shift to the political actors' stage performances, emphasizing how the Bharat Jodo Yatra enabled Gandhi to reinvent his image and establish a profound connection with the audience. This boosted support led him to give a solid counter-performance to Modi's seemingly impregnable election campaign, transforming the election campaign into a dynamic dialogue between the two political actors. In response, Modi switched to a communal and divisive narrative

to keep the audience fused, whereas Gandhi evoked a humorous and rhetorical script to counter Modi's strong persona. Moreover, Gandhi continued to perform a counternarrative script focused on safeguarding the Constitution and empowering marginalized communities, offering a stark contrast to Modi's script.

Third, I've identified three interpretative perspectives on the reception of the political actor's performances at the election rallies from which my respondents draw: The Enchanted – the die-hard fans of Modi; the Disenchanted – the audience that stopped fusing with Modi's persona and Gandhi's script filled the vacuum for them; and the Unswayed Clients – those unaffected by the script or performances of the two leaders and decide based on their material interests and local affinities. My interviews suggest a strong presence of these perspectives at all the rally sites I visited. It is important to note that the respondents might cut across more than one perspective and might exhibit different combinations of these categories as their reason for supporting a particular political actor.

The 2024 Election Campaign Literature

The Pollsters, Strategists, and Journalists

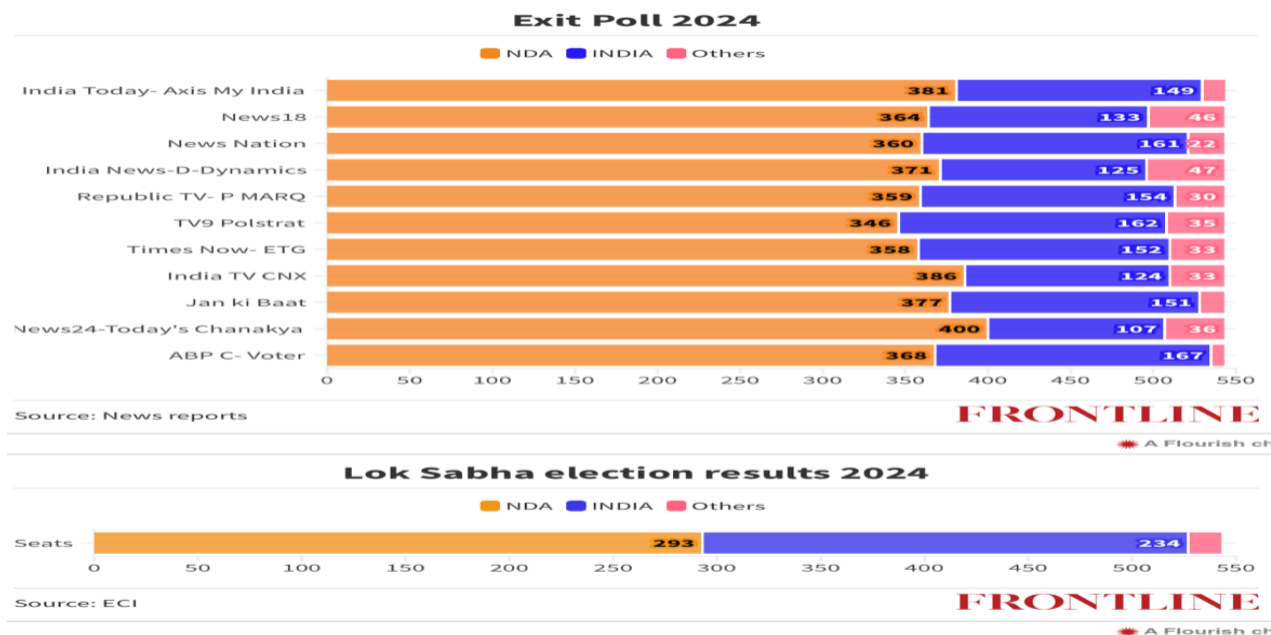
In the ongoing studies and literature on Indian elections, pollsters, strategists¹¹, and journalists worked to decipher voters' choices and preferences during the election season. The string connecting most of these professionals working to decode the election campaign and forecasting the results was that they unquestionably trusted Modi's performance and propagated the viewpoint that Modi would be the ultimate winner. While some marginal voices¹² challenged this, for the majority, the election campaign for general elections was not only spearheaded by Modi but also was defined by the slogan of "*Modi's Guarantee*" and "*Abki Baar 400 Paar*" [*This time, beyond*

¹¹ The Indian political consultant and tactician [Prashant Kishore](#), who was also responsible for handling the Modi campaign in the 2014 elections, came up with the prediction that there was no significant dissatisfaction or strong demand for alternatives in the 2024 elections and BJP would approximately maintain its previous tally of 303 seats.

¹² Senior journalists such as Prannoy Roy, Rajdeep Sardesai, Barkha Dutt, and Ravish Kumar, along with independent media houses such as The Wire, Newslaundry, Scroll, Maktoob Media, Dainik Bhaskar, Alt News, etc. (Cite) were providing a more complex picture of the campaign and engaging at a deeper level with Modi and Gandhi's performances. They were hinting towards lowering the "Modi Effect" and sharing the stories and perceptions of voters at the ground level. However, this wasn't the majority narrative, and due to limited resources and audiences, their narratives could not dominate the larger discourses in the public sphere.

400 seats]. Regarding the main opposition party, Congress, the verdict was, ‘They cannot get three figures. They would not get three figures’ (Kishore). All the [Exit Polls](#) (Img. 1) declared a landslide victory for Modi and the BJP; [many polls even showed](#) the NDA would surpass the 2019 seat tally of 353. Though polls and surveys occasionally accurately forecast outcomes, the 2024 election results were surprisingly far from these predicted expectations. The results sparked heated debates and criticism¹³ of these ‘number wizards’ who had failed to provide a genuine picture to the voters. Their methodology¹⁴ was called into question, and various issues were pointed out, including collecting a biased sample, wrong weightage, areas covered during the survey, and the profile of respondents (Neelanjan Sirkar).

Image 1



The critical question now is, what did the polls and surveys overlook? What factors contributed to their significant margin of error? What caused the shift in public opinion, leading to a decrease in

¹³ Pradeep Gupta, who is sometimes hailed as the number one pollster of India and responsible for India Today-Axis My India, was way off the mark in predicting the seats. He got emotional on the eve of the election results on national television, bemoaning his result forecast.

¹⁴ This group defended their error by arguing that there might have been a ‘fear factor’ among the people responding to the surveys. It means voters did not share whom they genuinely supported and planned to vote for because they feared harm or action from the supporters of the incumbent government. Usually, strategists and pollsters provide weightage to that percentage of the sample, too; however, this time, they did not expect that factor to play a significant role (Prashant Kishore interview with India Today).

BJP's popularity and a corresponding surge in support for the opposition. A thick, nuanced, more contextualized analysis of the actual circumstances on the ground would have helped this group identify the root of their error. My field observations show that a detailed comparative study of Gandhi's and Modi's election campaign strategies and performances would have helped forecasters anticipate the results better and avoid this slippage. In the coming sections, this paper will elaborate on how some voters became disenchanted with Modi's persona and stopped fusing with his script based on '*Vikas*' (development), 'Ram Temple' (*'Jo Ram ko laye hai, hum unko layenge'* – those who brought Ram, we will bring them) and communal rhetoric of building a Hindu - US versus a Muslim - THEM. In stark contrast, Rahul Gandhi's performances capitalized on this disillusionment, offering a counter-narrative that resonated with those yearning for change. His script highlighted critical issues like rampant unemployment, soaring inflation, and unequal wealth distribution while advocating for targeted policy-driven empowerment of marginalized communities. Furthermore, Gandhi's finely curated campaign around spreading '*Mohabbat*' (love) in Hindustan (India) struck a chord, presenting a vision of inclusivity and compassion that diverged sharply from the prevailing political discourse.

Although researchers acknowledge the significance of election campaigns in influencing voter decisions, the nuances of how and why they matter remain unclear. This study delves into the unexplored territory of dialogical nature of campaign dynamics, shedding light on the distinct approaches employed by two prominent candidates during their performances. Notably, a staggering 71% of respondents in a significant survey¹⁵ expressed interest in the election campaign, underscoring its crucial role in shaping voter choice. However, conventional analyses often overlook the rich details of campaign events, rallies, roadshows, and performances, instead focusing on emerging trends and voter preferences. In this research, I aim to fill this gap by providing a vivid, real-time account of how voters engage with campaign rituals and ceremonies, revealing the intricacies of campaign effects.

¹⁵ [CSDS Lokniti post-poll survey](#)

The Macro-Theorists

The macro-theorists provided grand theoretical narratives of the direction in which Indian politics is moving based on the big-picture themes that emerged during elections. These scholars agreed that Modi made the election about himself, showcasing his ‘performance,’ ‘omnipotence,’ and ‘ideological obsessions ([Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 2024](#)).’ During the election campaign, he was perceived as a self-aggrandizing populist figure, delusional about his divinity, claiming a “non-biological” birth (Mehta) and seeking to establish himself as a Hindu super-sovereign (Appadurai). However, these analyses did not engage with the actual performances or address the “How” question – How was the audience engaging and responding to these campaign performances on the ground during the campaign? They discuss the slogans, zingers, and controversial statements given by the populist leader [The Print, Scroll Ground Surveys] without thoroughly investigating voters’ engagement with those statements.

Only after the results did the theorists argue that the election results humanized Modi, pricking the bubble of his populist authority (Mehta). By rejecting Modi’s iconic narcissism, most people prioritized bread-and-butter issues ([Arjun Appadurai, 2024](#)) over communal and religious conflicts, focusing on practical concerns that directly impacted their lives([Yogendra Yadav](#)). The issue is that most of these arguments entered the debate retrospectively. While the campaign was taking place, the theorists were not firmly putting up this point of Modi’s performance losing its effect in the public domain. There was an agreement that Modi was a successful performer, and there was only a murmur that his fanbase might have slightly reduced. However, the change in narrative about Modi losing his charisma became dominant in the aftermath of the election results.

Another significant gap in these works is that Modi and his performance became the center of analysis for the scholars. The INDIA alliance and its leaders’ performance were overshadowed, and they were accused of not being creative enough and strong enough to give a fight. There were arguments that the opposition does not have a narrative, overemphasizes the local issues, and gets lost in them (Gudavarthy). Furthermore, the alliance lacked a joint struggle and had contradictory ideologies working together to beat Modi in the number games. Even after the elections, the focus has been on how the local issues were successful in breaching the majoritarian Hindutva agenda

of the BJP (Mehta, Pai, and Yadav). The role and performance of the leader of the opposition and the flagbearer of the INDIA alliance, Rahul Gandhi, have yet to be given the focus it calls for. An immersive involvement in Gandhi's performance during the campaign and people's participation in them would have helped to read between the lines and paint a profound picture of the Indian political landscape we were heading towards after the elections. All the issues that seem to have affected the voter's choice, as mentioned by the above groups of scholars, were brought up repeatedly in the speeches of Rahul Gandhi. He brought the narrative of the Constitution and local issues to the forefront through these rallies and performances (a narrative he and his party built upon since the Bharat Jodo Yatra). Though the opposition was seen as missing the bigger picture, their performances were based on local issues and seemed to have worked out for them to increase their seats. Gandhi's performances gained support with time because they were bringing in the discourse of going "Vocal for Local." The paper will detail this perspective. Comparing Modi's and Gandhi's performances during election rallies and roadshows in different states will provide evidence for the gaps we observe in the above works. This study reveals how their interactions with audiences might have influenced the election outcome by undertaking a comparative multi-site ethnography of Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi's campaign performances.

Methods

It is no longer possible to formulate a macro understanding of a political phenomenon based on the context of a single site. Hence, to understand the electoral campaign during the 2024 national elections in India, I "*Followed the Political Actor.*" This multi-site ethnography method strategy helped me to decode the campaign performances of political actors Rahul Gandhi and Modi. As the performances keep modifying based on the changing local socio-cultural symbols, codes, myths, and structures. These modifications in performances redefine the relationship between political leaders (actors) and voters (audience) as we move from one site to the next. A multi-site ethnography can serve the purpose of discerning the fragmented and scattered nature of the 2024 elections and contemporary Indian politics. It can show us how political actors mobilize voters through effective performances, especially at a time when their interests are antithetical.

As a method, multi-site ethnography helps explore the journey of the object of study using "tracking strategies" like "follow the thing." The thing can be a commodity¹⁶, metaphor, people, plot, story, allegory, life, biography, or conflict (Marcus, 1995). This tracking reveals complex transformations in meaning and value as objects move (Gagnon 2017, 8). Connecting such micro-empirical transformations can give substance to a comprehensive account of a larger phenomenon. For example, Claudio E. Benzecry's global ethnographic journey on the multiple intersecting storylines and characters constituted the production of a 'global shoe' (The Perfect Fit). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) tracked matsutake mushrooms in their global flows. Ruth Deller (2016) followed the journey of three artists and examined how mature female fans were presented in newspapers. This interdisciplinary nature (Nancy Ferriss, 2013) of multi-site ethnography acknowledges macro-theoretical concepts and narratives but do not rely on them for the contextual architectural framing of a set of subjects (Marcus, 96). Hence, there is flexibility in observing different political, cultural, and social imaginaries involved in transforming the object of study. This research aims to introduce another layer of complexity to this ongoing evolution of the approach by adding the political component to the mix.

To understand the election campaign in India, I observed the relationship between the performance given by the political actors Modi and Rahul Gandhi during the campaign period and the audience's reception of it. I combined multi-site ethnography (Marcus 1995) with in-person interviews of those who attended campaign rallies and roadshows. My observations began on March 10th, which was also approximately the beginning of the campaign period for the 2024 National elections in India that occurred between April 16th and June 1st in seven phases. I covered election rallies in 5 states (4 states, 1 Union Territory) and 16 cities/towns/villages to capture a nuanced picture of how the campaign performances unfolded throughout India. I invoked the 'Cultural Theory of Social Performance' by the Cultural Sociologist Jeffrey C Alexander (2011) as the underlying theoretical framework for decoding the performances of the populist leader Narendra Modi and his leading contender, Rahul Gandhi. The theory focuses on how, with the

¹⁶ *The Social Life of Things* by Arjun Appadurai (2011) proposed a new perspective on the circulation of commodities in social life. He introduces the idea of 'commodity as a social relationship' to illustrate how commodities are more than mere items of economic exchange and gain significance through their social and cultural contexts.

increasing complexities in society, the elements¹⁷ that compose the performance of an actor have become separated and defused. Re-fusing the separated and defused elements has become much more challenging in order to make a performance successful. To attain success, the actor needs to form a '*cultural extension*' (meaning to relate to the existing cultural symbols and texts of society) and a '*psychological identification*' (identify on a personal level with the performance) with the audience. These extensions generate a connection between the performer and their audience, even in the most differentiated, segmented, and complex social and cultural reality. Following election campaigns in India can be a litmus test to check if the political actors' performances re-fuse the elements and mobilize voters to garner votes in their favor. My research design and coding of the campaign rallies and roadshows have allowed me to examine how PM Modi produces successful, effective performances by re-fusing the elements and forming a cultural extension and psychological identification with the audience. While his main contender, Rahul Gandhi, might not be as successful in re-fusing the elements, his performances have paved the way for counter-performances in India¹⁸.

During the fieldwork, I attended rallies in Nandurbar, Dhule, Malegaon, Nashik, Dharavi, and Mumbai Shivaji Park in Maharashtra; Meerut in Uttar Pradesh; Churu, Nagaur, Jalore, and Banswada in Rajasthan; Coimbatore, Mettupalayam in Tamil Nadu; and East Delhi, Dwarka, and Chandni Chowk in Union Territory (UT) New Delhi (Table 1). To capture the maximum difference in the mis-en-scene of the rallies and understand the modifications in the performances based on the changes in the location, I chose states from North, North-West, Central, South-West, and South India. The sites also represent political variability in terms of which party is exercising power at the state level, with BJP ruling with an absolute majority in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, a coalition of Shiv-Sena and BJP in Maharashtra, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)-led front ruling in Tamil Nadu and Aam Aadmi Party in New Delhi. To further complicate the difference in the perception of voters based on their locality, the rally sites represent a mix of metro cities, tier-two cities, towns, and villages. A moving multi-site ethnography helped to decode how political actors have the ability to perform contrasting and opposing views to mobilize their voters. Modi

¹⁷ The six elements of social performance are the script, actors, mis-en-scene, observers of the performance (audience), symbolic production, and social power.

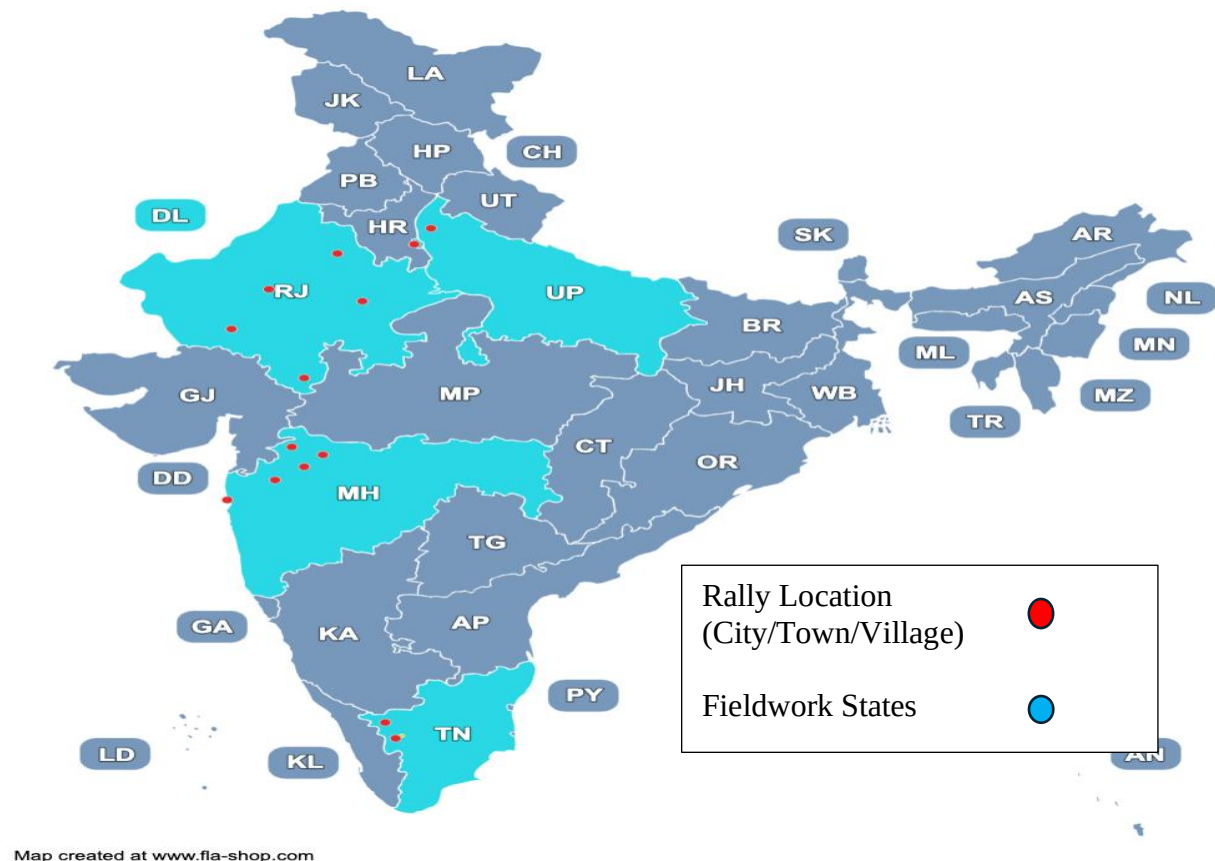
¹⁸ Add the ethnographic discourse analysis point here and read Gowan(2010).

keeps redefining the binaries of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ during the campaign to fuse the elements and give a successful performance.

Table 1:

Rally Location	Category	State/UT
Nandurbar	Town	Maharashtra
Dhule	City	Maharashtra
Malegaon	City	Maharashtra
Nashik	City	Maharashtra
Dharavi	Neighborhood (Mumbai)	Maharashtra
Mumbai Shivaji Park	Neighborhood (Mumbai)	Maharashtra
Meerut	City	Uttar Pradesh
Churu	City	Rajasthan
Nagaur	Town	Rajasthan
Jalore	Town	Rajasthan
Banswada	Village	Rajasthan
Coimbatore	City	Tamil Nadu
Mettupalayam	Town	Tamil Nadu
East Delhi	District (Delhi)	UT New Delhi
Dwarka	Neighborhood (Delhi)	UT New Delhi

Rally Location	Category	State/UT
Chandni Chowk	Neighborhood (Delhi)	UT New Delhi



I chose the states in advance based on the geographical location and the ruling party in power. However, finalizing the exact field sites and following the rallies of political leaders resulted from a meticulous process of selecting the sample 2-3 days before the main event because the campaign schedules are confirmed and made of public knowledge only a few days in advance. Hence, the logistical components of traveling and accommodation were nailed down spontaneously. I spent a minimum of seven days and a maximum of 20 days in each state. The political actors would organize two to three rallies daily in different states, which was difficult to follow. Modi alone did over 200 rallies and road shows during the campaign period¹⁹. Hence, the final filter for selecting the sites was based on accessibility, availability of transportation, accommodation, and ease of

¹⁹ Rahul Gandhi did over a 100.

going to the next location. I used different modes of transportation, including airplanes, buses, trains, inter-city cabs, and auto-rickshaws, while traveling between cities and to the rally location. For my accommodations, in the beginning, I was staying in the best available hotel/motel in the region. However, after facing some safety concerns, I chose to stay with friends or family if I was attending rallies in village areas or small towns. This is also why I attended most village and small-town rallies in my home state, Rajasthan. Language also played a significant role in deciding these sites; except in Tamil Nadu (a translator was used), Modi and Gandhi gave their speeches in Hindi in all other locations. Therefore, decoding the live performance became easier. I've professional-level proficiency in Hindi, Rajasthani, and English, which helped me have a deeper engagement with the performers and the audience. It also allowed me to transcribe and translate the interviews from the regional languages to English.

I chose to sit in different sections at each rally to observe the variability in the interaction between the audience and the political leaders and how the script unfolded for a respondent based on their location with respect to the stage. The closer you are to the stage more social and symbolic power you hold. There are VVIPs, VIPs, Media, Party Workers (not officially designated), and the General Public Section. Those who cannot get a chair to sit under the tent in the General section stand in the open ground at the very end. I spent time ranging from 2 hours to 10 hours at the rally sites. The closer I wanted to be close the stage, the earlier I had to reach the location, except for sitting in the VIP section. In a few roadshows and rallies, I decided to sit next to the security officials or police as among 1000s of men on the street, there were barely any women visible, and it got uncomfortable to be a part of the crowd. In addition to attending these rallies, I watched and compared how these events were covered and shared with a wider audience on YouTube and Instagram by the official political party and leader's channels. To bring some distance between the political actors and the audience and observe if the performance was effective even when a certain time has passed, I chose Jodhpur, Udaipur in Rajasthan, and New Delhi to code rallies from YouTube and interview those who attended rallies previously as I've personal resemblance with the socio-cultural and political context of these cities, which helped me find respondents through snow-ball sampling.

I coupled the multi-site ethnography with my 75 interviews, which investigated the meanings of the 2024 national elections campaign period by examining respondents' perceptions of the political actors' performances. I conducted the interviews during all seven phases of elections, each lasting between 15 minutes to 3-4 hours. The duration depended on where I met the respondent; if someone sat next to me during a rally, I could have an in-depth conversation for hours. However, if I met someone while entering, leaving, or standing behind the general audience, those interactions were short-ranging between 15-20 minutes. If a respondent owned a shop outside the rally location, if they lived nearby, or if they were auto-drivers, and I took my return ride with them, it could be a longer interview. I reached my interviewees randomly at the rally site. However, I wanted a representative sample, so I tried recruiting based on the following parameters: age, occupational background, gender, and political ideology, which provided me with a diverse range of responses.

Apart from the rallies, I regularly followed election campaign-related news in newspapers, including The Hindu, India Express, and Dainik Bhaskar (Hindi). I also followed news from small independent online media houses – Mint, The Print, The Wire, News Laundry, and News Click. To get a more refined picture of the performances and compare what the leader was saying on the ground vs to media, I watched TV interviews given by Modi to News18, India Today, Aaj Tak, etc. After the campaign period, I worked with the Centre for the Study of Developing Society (CSDS), Delhi.

The limits I faced while conducting the fieldwork were as follows: First, I couldn't engage with many women during the rallies. Even if there were a section for women, only the party workers or hardline supporters would be more willing to talk; normally, women would shy away or not respond much. Politics seems to be a male-dominated space, and at times, it got uncomfortable when I was the only female sitting between a few hundred men (Malegaon, Maharashtra). Second, I found it difficult to find respondents in Tamil Nadu from the general public during the rally because of the language barrier. It was in a village region, and most people didn't know English or Hindi. Third, due to safety concerns, I couldn't attend the late evening and night political events at most of the sites. I had to return to my accommodation by the time it was dark.

Decoding the 2024 election campaign rally performances of Modi and Gandhi

Beginning with a detailed and subtle comprehension of the rally preparations in a comparative manner will allow the readers to appreciate the underlying themes that will become significant when the election campaign performance of both leaders unfolds.

Mobilization of people by party workers to attend the rally

A political rally can be defined as a blockbuster if it draws a large audience, akin to a sold-out show that signifies a movie's success. A sea of enthusiastic supporters creates the perception of a triumphant leader, while empty chairs spell doom, indicating waning enthusiasm and dwindling support. For example, the 2024 national elections saw a significant downturn for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, with a loss of 29 seats, plummeting from 62 in 2019 and 71 in 2014 to 33 out of 80. This decline occurred amidst the backdrop of the Ram Temple construction in Ayodhya, ironically including the loss of the Faizabad constituency where the temple is located. Interestingly, the campaign rallies of Rahul Gandhi and Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav drew massive crowds, indicating a shift in public support. For example, at [Prayagraj, UP](#), the crowd's enthusiasm became uncontrollable, forcing the leaders to depart without addressing the audience. This phenomenon signaled a desire among the people to explore alternative options and listen to the opposition's proposals. The substantial [loss of seats](#) in the crucial state of Uttar Pradesh for the BJP after election results was already becoming apparent with the shift in public sentiment, as evidenced by the enthusiastic response to opposition rallies, suggesting a reevaluation of political allegiances in the state.

In the instances below, I'm not disputing the significance of rallies or the authentic enthusiasm of attendees. However, it's crucial to recognize the considerable efforts of politicians, party workers, and the party apparatus in creating an impression of broad support. The perception of drawing in large crowds to a rally by the leader is a mark of his grand stature, fan following, and support from the voters. A political rally can make or break a politician's chances of winning the elections, prompting party workers and leaders to invest immense effort in mobilizing people to ensure large-scale participation. Both parties, BJP and Congress, and their allies employed strategies like

personal visits to homes, shops, and offices and courting influential local figures. These key individuals of a community or neighborhood are invited to the rally and encouraged to bring a large entourage, amplifying the event's impact and showcasing the leader's popularity. Upon closer examination during the fieldwork, it became apparent that these in-person interactions and personal engagements are often supplemented by tangible incentives, typically monetary rewards, food, or alcohol, aimed at winning over supporters.

A farmer at the Coimbatore rally in Tamil Nadu told me, *"The rate for parties to invite us to the rallies is fixed. DMK gives Rs 350, AIDMK 250."* An auto-driver at a rally in Maharashtra informed me that when a BJP leader visited last month, they were given 500rs per person, free meals, and alcohol at the rally location. He said, *"I went there along with three of my friends. We enjoyed food and alcohol and came back. We will vote for Congress, but who doesn't love a complimentary meal and some extra cash?"* He further added, *"Due to elections, we have been getting free alcohol since February. We don't get jobs and opportunities in our village, madam, but free alcohol is always available."*

A farm laborer at the Banswada rally in Rajasthan shared his experience of getting payment from parties based on family members he brought to the rally. He received 800 Rs for bringing two people to a Congress rally. Interestingly, a wage laborer at the Meerut rally told me, *"People from his village neighborhood have attended four big BJP rallies in nearby areas. They are all taken to the rally location in buses provided by the political party and paid the same amount for each rally."* When he and people around him started leaving as soon as PM Modi began his speech. I asked him, *going so soon?* He responded, *"Our job here is done. We were here to be a part of the large crowd to welcome Modiji and come on TV. It's time to beat the traffic and reach our village back before late night."*

The aerial footage of Modi's rallies, showcasing thousands waving at his helicopter, and Rahul Gandhi's videos of packed grounds can be persuasive, shaping viewers' perceptions of their popularity. They work tirelessly to draw large crowds to every event, often at any cost, which can create a misleading narrative of widespread popularity. Based on the responses I heard during the rallies, this might have happened in the case of Modi's rallies, as the BJP seems to have spent the

most to attract rally attendants²⁰. However, as the election results show, the large crowds didn't convert to seats for the party in all states.

Political Rallies: A Boon or Bane

Rallies serve as a platform for political actors to establish a direct connection with voters through their performances, enabling voters to form a personal identification and cultural extension with the leaders. These events allow leaders to captivate and unite the audience through their performances, creating a palpable fusion during the event. Nevertheless, the public's perception of these large-scale performances is multifaceted, eliciting a range of opinions and reactions. On the day of the rally, when a prominent campaigner like Modi or Rahul Gandhi is visiting a location, extensive logistical preparations are set in motion. The police and administration issue press notes outlining the event details, including measures to prevent traffic congestion, temporary road closures, and diversions to ensure a smooth passage for attendees and maintain crowd control. However, these measures often disrupt the normal functioning of the city or town, causing frustration among residents who don't plan to attend the rally. The visiting leader's identity intriguingly influences the response to these events. Supporters tend to tolerate the inconveniences, while those who oppose the leader view the rally as a significant nuisance.

For instance, a shopkeeper near a Modi rally in Dwarka, Delhi, expressed mixed feelings: *"The traffic will take hours to clear up... all this noise... but it's good that Modi Ji is visiting our area. It shows our constituency is important to him, and officials will now pay more attention to our region."* Similar sentiments were echoed by Congress supporters when Rahul Gandhi visited. Another respondent, a middle-aged farmer during the Coimbatore rally, told me, *"It is good that Modi is giving attention to the south; people are getting to know him more; rally is a great way to get one-on-one interaction with the leader. To see him in action."*

However, the tone shifted dramatically when the visiting leader wasn't their preferred choice. The rally transformed from a minor inconvenience with potential benefits to a major annoyance. An auto driver in Maharashtra exemplified this shift while showing his frustration with Gandhi's rally:

²⁰ The party has [assets](#) worth Rs 6,046.81 crore, keeping the main opposition Congress at just Rs 805.68 crore.

“Why does he waste so much money on these events? The giant billboards won’t translate to votes... Visiting once in five years won’t change voters’ minds... They ruled for 70 years, looted the country, and now he’s walking all over India to gather votes... This empathetic leader act won’t work; it’s just drama.” Such extreme responses were not isolated incidents, varying across rally locations based on the political leader, party affiliation, and socio-political context.

An interviewee, a farmer at the Nagore, Rajasthan Modi rally, stated, *“He does 100s of rallies all over India, wasting our resources. When farmers ask for a minimum support price for our crops, subsidies, and loan waivers, the government says the resources are limited. Where do they get the money for these extravagant shows?”* Ultimately, for the people, political rallies can be seen as a boon, bringing attention and potential benefits to an area and providing a chance to fuse with a leader or a bane, causing inconvenience and disruption to daily life, depending on one’s perspective and political affiliation.

Changing the aesthetics of the locality

Awash with vibrant decorations, the cityscape undergoes a transformation when a political leader comes to town. This metamorphosis is tailored to the visiting leader, reflecting their unique style and message. During Rahul Gandhi’s Bharat Jodo Yatra in Maharashtra and other campaign rallies, I observed a flurry of activity a day before his arrival. Billboards featuring his image, juxtaposed with local leaders, sprouted along the highways at regular intervals. As you approach the rally site, the frequency and grandeur of these billboards, banners, party flags, frills, and posters intensify, enveloping the city center and surrounding areas in a festive atmosphere reminiscent of Diwali. This spectacle celebrates the leader, his party, and local party workers, showcased as champions of the leader’s vision.

In contrast, Modi’s rallies brought an all-pervasive presence, transcending the localized decorations seen during Rahul Gandhi’s visits. While Gandhi’s impact was contained within a specific region close to the rally locations, Modi’s influence seemed to permeate every nook and cranny of the town, creating an immersive experience that was hard to escape. It wasn’t the explicit presence of BJP flags or Modi’s campaign materials that dominated the region, but rather the subtle

yet pervasive presence of cultural symbols that the party and the leader have appropriated over the years - namely, the iconic figure of Ram and the distinctive color saffron (bhagwa²¹) - which seemed to be everywhere. Throughout the four north Indian states I visited during the campaign period (excluding Tamil Nadu), the presence of bhagwa frills, flags with God Rama's image, "*Jai Shri Ram*" (Hail God Rama) prints, and Ram Temple posters were ubiquitous - visible in every city, town, village, neighborhood, market, skyscraper, office buildings, isolated highway 'dhabas' (roadside restaurant) and motels. This pervasive imagery stemmed from the recent grand Pran Pratishtha (consecration ceremony) celebration of Ram Temple in January 2024, organized by Modi, BJP, RSS, and the temple trust, marking the return of Ram after 500 years²². BJP and Modi claimed it as their victory, while the Hindu community of India, particularly in the north, rejoiced with a magnificent and mesmerizing celebration. These decorations remained present throughout the campaign period, echoed by the phrase "*Jo Ram ko laye hai, hum unko layenge*" (Those who brought Ram back, we will bring them [back to power]). Songs with this line played at rallies and in campaign vehicles, while billboards featuring the phrase dominated city landscapes. Notably, this background decoration persisted even during the 'silence period' of the model code of conduct, 24 hours before and on polling day, as it didn't feature any leader's image or party symbols. This campaigning strategy effectively exploited loopholes, maintaining a constant presence before voters and reinforcing their connection to these codes.

However, the reality was more complex than it initially seemed. During my visits to various sites, including a Rahul Gandhi rally in Nandurbar, Maharashtra, the ubiquitous imagery of the Ram Temple and Lord Ram first led me to assume a landslide victory for Modi. At first, the proliferation of bhagwa Shri Ram flags made me hesitant to engage with the locals, assuming they were all BJP supporters. But as I began conversing with them, I discovered a surprising disconnect - many people had differentiated their support for the temple from their political affiliations. This nuance,

²¹ Bhagwa or orange color is a symbol of Hindutva and the party color for BJP.

²² Before the consecration ceremony, Modi undertook [a spiritual journey through four states](#), visiting temples related to Ramayana: Panchavati in Nashik, Maharashtra, Rameshwaram & Dhanushkodi in Tamil Nadu, and other temples in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. I, too, visited the former two state locations and the transformation in those cities was noticeable. The respondents informed me that the city was cleaned, and Modi promised certain investments for the town's development, especially the temple region. In many parts of the city and around the temple region, the walls were painted with characters from the Ramayana, portraying the instances from the epic. People seemed satisfied with this attention to their cities and recognized the positive change it brought to the landscape.

overlooked by the party, pollsters, and even myself initially, revealed that not everyone waving the flag was a die-hard BJP supporter.

It was an onion farmer in Dhule, whose car featured a figurine of God Hanuman hanging from the rearview mirror and a bumper sticker of God Ram, who made me aware of this misconception. He stated, *“They don’t own Ram, most of them haven’t even read the scriptures. I’m a devout Ram follower (Ram Bhakt) and support the temple’s construction, but let’s be clear, it wasn’t Modi who built the temple. The Supreme Court ruled in its favor, and the temple trust funded it. They’re just trying to take credit for it.”*

A hotel owner in Jalore, Rajasthan, proudly displaying a small model of the Ram Temple at his reception, shared, *“My family and I are overjoyed that the temple was built. We acknowledge Modi and the BJP’s involvement and are thankful for their efforts. However, when it comes to voting, that’s a separate decision altogether - hinting that their gratitude wouldn’t necessarily translate to votes for the party.”*

The CSDS pre-poll data reinforces this insight, revealing that while respondents recognized the Ram Mandir as a [consolidating force for Hindu identity](#) and praised it as one of the Union government’s [most notable achievements](#), it didn’t rank among the [top reasons](#) for re-electing the BJP-led NDA government. This disparity suggests that the temple’s symbolic presence across the nation also led to a misperception about electoral outcomes. Essentially, the aesthetics of the temple didn’t necessarily translate to electoral support, highlighting a disconnect between cultural symbolism and voting behavior that the party leaders had taken for granted.

Training the party workers and the rally crowd

Synchronizing party workers with a unified message is crucial for effective campaigning. Compared to Congress, the BJP excels in this aspect, as evident during the election campaign and rallies where workers train the crowd to embrace party symbols and slogans. This is likely due to the fact that the RSS, the parent organization of the BJP, has been built on a strong foundation of cadre training. As a result, many RSS cadre members also make up a significant portion of BJP

workers, bringing their training and discipline to the party's ranks. A consistent narrative is conveyed by BJP workers across states, typically starting with Modi's divine comparison to Shiv, Vishnu, or Rama. They then highlight regional infrastructure development, India's elevated global stature under Modi, and emotive issues like the revocation of Kashmir's special status²³ and the Ram Temple construction. Workers are well-versed in party slogans, such as *"Modi Ki Guarantee," "Abki Baar, 400 Paar (This time, beyond 400 seats)," "Phir Ek Baar, Modi Sarkar (One more time, Modi government),"* and *"Jo Ram ko Laye hai Hum Unko Layenge (Those who brought back Ram, we will bring them),"* demonstrating a cohesive messaging strategy that resonates with voters. Their well-rehearsed speech, lasting just two to three minutes, was a concise and effective tool for promoting their leader, delivering a powerful and memorable message to potential voters. Notably, these campaign interactions are singularly focused on Modi and the government's achievements. The workers steadfastly adhere to the script, avoiding discussions about personal issues or other party activities. This disciplined approach ensures that the messaging remains concentrated on the designated talking points, reinforcing the party's narrative and maintaining a unified voice.

A BJP worker I met before the Meerut rally skillfully delivered this scripted pitch, starting with a provocative question, *"Madam, do you think Modi Ji is human?"* Without pausing for a response, he declared, *"If you think he is human, you're wrong. He's an incarnation of Shiv. If your heart is pure and you look at him with reverence, you'll experience his divine presence."* He emphasized Modi's tireless work ethic, saying, *"Only a deity can work 18-20 hours a day selflessly for the nation."* He highlighted visible progress, such as reduced travel time from Meerut to Delhi due to new roads and the fulfillment of the long-held dream of the Ram Temple. Dismissing the opposition as beneath Modi, before walking towards the rally ground, he concluded, *"If you truly want the nation's upliftment and development, you'll vote for him."*

The well-trained cadre's synchronized approach is also evident at the rally ground. At all rallies, before Modi takes the stage, mostly a woman representative takes the mic before Modi's arrival

²³ [A 370](#) of the Indian Constitution gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir. The NDA regime abrogated this status, and the state was divided into two union territories: Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The special status has been removed, and the state has been fully integrated into the nation's mainstream.

to the podium, leading the crowd in chants of “Modi,” “Modi,” “Modi.” These chants are skillfully interwoven with other slogans, such as “*Modi Ji ko Jai Shri Ram*²⁴” (the crowd responds with “*Jai Shri Ram*”), “*Bharat Mata Ki Jai*” (the crowd responds with “*Jai*”), and “*Har Har Modi*” followed by more “*Modi*” chants. The crowd is also led in party slogans like “*Phir Ek Baar, Modi Sarkar*” and “*Abki Baar, 400²⁵ Paar.*” As the crowd becomes increasingly enthusiastic, they raise their hands, donning Modi masks, portraits, and posters, while wearing orange “*bhagwa*” straps with lotus²⁶ prints. This synchronized chanting is a form of live training, preparing the audience to participate in the ritualistic act of responding to Modi’s cues during his speech. The crowd is essentially taught the script in advance, allowing for a seamless transition when Modi leads them in chants, creating a fusion of the audience with the political leader.

In contrast to this high-functioning, well-trained cadre that supports the campaigning and acts as the supporting actors to make Modi’s performance more successful, the Congress cadre lacks uniformity and consistency. Due to the late development of their campaign narrative during the [Bharat Nyay Jodo Yatra](#)²⁷ ([Justice March](#)), they couldn’t adequately train their workers. My conversations with workers often deviated from party policies and schemes to personal conflicts and criticisms of Rahul Gandhi’s inner circle. A common circulating among the workers of the yatra was, “*The people close to Rahul Ji try to manipulate him. They only want to fulfill their selfish motives and launch their political careers by being a party volunteer.*” Accusations of manipulation and selfish motives circulated among workers, creating a lack of trust. Workers pushed their agendas, causing confusion at rallies. For instance, thousands of supporters gathered at the Malegaon rally, but when workers tried to lead chants, confusion ensued due to multiple new slogans. Last-minute slogan training failed to energize the crowd, leaving them divided upon

²⁴ Meaning—Wishing Jai Shree/Shri Ram to Modi. In India, Jai Shree Ram is used to greet people in many of the north Indian Hindi-speaking states. Jai Shri Ram means Hailing God Ram. Another version of it that is sometimes used in rallies is “Jai Siya Ram,” meaning hail God Ram and his wife, Sita.

²⁵ 400 here represents the number of constituencies the BJP aims to win during the elections out of a total of 543 where elections took place.

²⁶ BJP’s party symbol.

²⁷ Gandhi undertook two yatras – the [Bharat Jodo Yatra](#) (Unite India March) from North to South India and later [the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra](#) (Fight for Justice March) from East to West India. The official statement by the Congress party has been that the “*Yatra is a movement to raise voices for economic justice, social justice, and political justice. Democracy has to be saved. The Constitution has to be saved. We have to show a new future, a bright future, to crores of families who are suffering from inflation and unemployment.*”

Gandhi's arrival, prompting a loud DJ blast to cover up the lackluster response. Unlike the BJP, initially, the Congress lacked a unified campaign message, catchy slogans, and cultural codes.

The party's inability to create a common script was exacerbated by the alliance's complexity, which hindered worker training and efficient crowd engagement. At the culmination of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, the INDIA alliance leaders joined at Shivaji Park, Mumbai. A visual unity was evident, with leaders from multiple parties sitting together, taking turns to talk about the authoritarian nature of the BJP government and projecting a united stand against the BJP on stage. This was echoed by the party flags and banners of different parties tied together on the ground as well. However, the INDIA alliance's complexity, with multiple parties and agendas, hindered a clear message. The lack of a shared narrative among the party workers on the rally ground led to disjointed chanting and a missed opportunity for a unified performance. The workers of a party would only chant slogans or hail the leader of the party they belonged to. The audience was ready to fuse with the performance completely. Still, the ground workers weren't fulfilling their roles as the supporting actors and not providing a seamless connection between the leader and the audience. The evening culminated with a historic moment: all the leaders of the INDIA alliance united on stage, showcasing a collective resolve. Yet, a lingering question persisted: could Rahul Gandhi's leadership bridge the performance gap and galvanize a united front, or would the BJP's formidable machinery continue to dominate the political arena? As the election campaign season kicked into high gear, every moment was crucial, and the outcome hung precariously in the balance. The fate of India's democratic experiment teetered on the edge, leaving citizens anxiously wondering what the future held. With the election clock ticking, the nation held its breath, awaiting the election drama to unfold.

Emergence of a fusing audience

Despite a disjointed performance due to multiple actors with varying agendas, yet my multiple interactions in the field showed that the audience's desire for change was palpable. Their hopes and desires matched the script shared by the political actors on stage. They sought alternative perspectives and pushed back against the state's escalating repression. For example, A retired school teacher sitting behind me complained and mocked that the *"Acche Din Aane Waale Hai"*

(Good Days Are Coming) promised by Modi in 2014 after winning the first time never came. The attendees were wary of the BJP and critical of the media presence, labeling them “*Godi Media*”²⁸ for their perceived bias. They criticized the media for selectively showcasing radical opinions and misrepresenting reality. They declined to interact with the press, urging them to depart and allowing them to listen to the leader.

A mid-level post-office worker beside me remarked, “*They won’t even broadcast the thousands that have gathered to support the leaders today. Instead, they’ll show footage of half-empty chairs from earlier in the day and claim nobody attended the opposition’s event, mocking us with misleading information.*” Consequently, attendees at the rally expressed skepticism towards the potentially biased information disseminated by the media, and a growing narrative among the respondents emerged, critiquing the underwhelming performance of Modi and the BJP, which fell short of public expectations. Notably, the atmosphere was characterized by a diminished sense of fear. An IT professional beside me remarked, “*We can’t remain passive anymore.... we can’t criticize the opposition for not taking a stand.*” He praised Gandhi for his courage despite the risks of political leaders being jailed and their finances being frozen. The IT professional continued, “*I’m here to show support, to let Gandhi know he’s not alone, and to encourage him to persist in this fight. I believe this is why thousands of us have gathered today – we were all waiting for someone to lead the way and show us that we don’t have to be afraid.*”

The crowd was electrified, applauding and cheering as political leaders on stage criticized Modi, BJP, and government policies. Song and dance performances were also part of the rally, but the audience focused more on assessing the leaders’ authenticity on stage. They were there to evaluate and judge the political actors’ performance and confirm if it was genuine enough to fuse with. As Rahul Gandhi took the stage, the crowd fell silent. People stopped wherever they were, with thousands hanging on his every word. They nodded and gestured in agreement as he addressed issues like corruption, electoral bonds, manipulations with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), government authoritarian policies, communal politics, wealth inequality, and non-representative caste backgrounds in media houses and government services. Gandhi’s script criticized Modi for

²⁸ A term used to signify the media outlets that unquestionably support Modi and his party, they have a pro-government narrative and would go beyond measures to criticize the opposition.

being a performer and acting out the script given to him by RSS. With a hint of satire, Rahul Gandhi delighted the crowd, prompting loud laughter and applause as he described how Modi entertains the public with theatrical gestures, such as performing an underwater ritual one day and piloting a fighter jet the next, all while diverting attention from pressing issues. Further, he accused the media of hiding behind masks and serving their masters. Gandhi then outlined the INDIA alliance's vision and policies, leaving the audience hopeful and energized, seemingly united with him in his message. The party workers also appeared to have drawn inspiration from this grand event, and as the election campaign progressed, their renewed motivation and enhanced coordination became increasingly evident.

Bharat Jodo Yatra²⁹ and the transformation in Gandhi's image

The source of the people's faith in Gandhi is fascinating, especially given the lack of a cohesive narrative among party workers during the Yatra. A crucial factor is Gandhi's skillful role as a political actor, warranting attention and analysis. Through my observation of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Maharashtra, I noticed significant improvements in Gandhi's speech delivery and audience engagement. The Yatra helped Gandhi rebrand himself nationwide, transforming from a perceived "Pappu³⁰" or a "*tubelight*³¹" or "*Shehzada*³²" (*young prince*) to a fearless leader willing to challenge the authoritarian regime³³. The Bharat Jodo Yatra and its successor played a

²⁹ The term "yatra" signifies a journey or procession, often with a spiritual connotation, implying a pilgrimage to revered sites like temples, sacred mountains, or rivers. Such a journey is believed to purify the self and foster a deeper connection with the divine. The path taken is just as important as the destination, as the challenges encountered during the yatra represent an act of devotion. In this context, Gandhi's decision to embark on a nationwide journey to champion justice, democracy, and the Constitution takes on a profound significance. On a personal level, his willingness to endure physical and mental hardships to unite with the people of India can be seen as a quest to connect with the sacred essence of the nation, purifying it from the ills of majoritarian rule. By invoking the concept of yatra, Gandhi's mission transcends politics, becoming a spiritual crusade for the soul of India.

³⁰ Pappu is a common pet name in India, especially in the North. In this context, it is also used to denote a foolish or an ill-witted person. The BJP successfully used the name as a political tool in the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections to discredit Congress leader and Member of Parliament (MP) Rahul Gandhi.

³¹ A person who is slow and "lives in his own world" and in this case, whose only talent was his name, "*Gandhi*"

³² Modi has repeatedly labeled Rahul Gandhi as a "*Shehzada*" (prince), implying that he is an out-of-touch elitist, born into privilege and ignorant of the everyday struggles of ordinary citizens, with a distorted understanding of the ground reality.

³³ When various political leaders such as the Jharkhand Chief Minister (CM) Hemant Soren, and Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal were put behind bars by the Enforcement Directorate (ED), a law enforcement and economic intelligence agency of Govt of India.

pivotal role in reshaping his image. Regardless of the political outcome, in India, yatras³⁴ like these often incorporate spiritual elements of “*Tapasya*³⁵” (*self-discipline*) and “*Seva*³⁶” (*service*), where leaders undertake arduous journeys, facing physical challenges and sacrificing comforts to understand people’s struggles. This ritualistic practice creates a sense of unity and shared experience, with the leader being viewed in a saintly light ([Jaffrelot](#)) for their selfless dedication to improving the lives of others.

Gandhi embodied the role of a compassionate leader practicing “*tapas*” and “*seva*” by wearing a simple white t-shirt throughout the yatras, even in extremely cold weather, symbolizing his willingness to endure hardships and understand the struggles of the Indian people. He bridged the physical and emotional gap with the people by walking among them, embracing them, and visiting their homes, shops, and neighborhoods to listen to their concerns and discuss their aspirations. He empathized with their plight and pledged to address their issues. A poignant moment captured by the media³⁷ was when he interacted with [a group of Dalit women in Madhya Pradesh](#), who are still forced to adhere to a discriminatory tradition, prohibited from wearing slippers in areas of the village controlled by the upper caste, and are instead required to carry them in their hands as a symbol of their subordinate status. One emotional woman appealed to Gandhi, saying, “*We got freedom 75 years ago, but we still await our freedom.*” Gandhi listened attentively and made a powerful gesture by himself, making the Dalit woman wear the slippers she held. He hugged the

³⁴ Yatras have long been a significant aspect of India’s political and socio-cultural heritage. Iconic leaders like Mahatma Gandhi have used yatras to traverse the country, gaining a deeper understanding of the people and their struggles before launching movements, such as the Dandi March against British salt taxation. Similarly, in 1990, BJP leader LK Advani’s Ram Rath Yatra aimed to build a Ram Temple at the Babri Masjid site, culminating in the masjid’s demolition in 1992. Even Narendra Modi has often highlighted his own travels across India as an RSS worker, allowing him to connect with his audience on a temporal, spatial, and cultural level.

³⁵ Meaning “to heat, to give out warmth, to shine, to burn.” The term evolves also to mean “to suffer, to mortify the body, undergo penance” in order to “burn away past karma” and liberate oneself.

³⁶ The act of selfless service. To serve without expecting anything in return. A central concept in Hinduism. It was also successful in achieving unprecedented reform to the conservative practices of the caste system in India during the freedom struggle. Seva began to “connote the upliftment of depressed castes/classes, through educational, cultural, and sometimes religious, work” (Srivatsan 2006, 427). The civil society associations introduced and propagated the practice of seva, especially among the upper castes, to undertake seva to build a unified stand against the colonial rulers by moving beyond their differences. As these sevaks started realizing that they could bring a positive change and reform to the society without being dependent on the British, they attained the confidence to articulate their ‘political interests’ further and ‘confront’ the colonial ‘state with demands’ arising from various sections of society to gain further control of the economy, polity, and society. The meanings of what was considered ‘sacred/pure’ and ‘polluted/profane’ became blurry, and consequently, the caste hierarchies became a bit porous.

³⁷ The [Bharat Jodo Yatra YouTube](#) channel, the [Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra Website](#), [Twitter Account](#) share various such examples throughout the two yatras.

women and sat alongside them, transcending the caste-based traditional binary of sacred and polluted, demonstrating the ultimate act of seva (service) and solidarity.

During the second yatra in 2024, I witnessed that Gandhi's script allowed him to transform from a perceived out-of-touch '*Shehzada*' (prince) to an approachable and down-to-earth leader. To make his interactions with the audience seem authentic, he often invited children and someone from the audience to join him on the jeep bonnet, which served as his makeshift stage in markets and on roads. Notably, he even engaged with critics, inviting those who booed or responded sarcastically to share their concerns. When protestors³⁸ erupted during his speeches, Gandhi calmly approached the demonstrators, saying, "*Let me speak first, then I'll listen to your issues*" (Nashik, Maharashtra Road Show) while keeping his security at a distance. The political actor's willingness to listen and engage with people on the ground demonstrated a genuine connection with their concerns.

While the first yatra in 2022-23 was widely celebrated and undoubtedly enhanced Gandhi's image, its impact on the Congress party's electoral prospects and ability to educate and mobilize people against the incumbent government's authoritarian tendencies was uncertain (Gudavarthy, [Jaffrelot](#), The [Hindu editorial](#), [Neerja Chowdhury](#)). Although less notable to scholars and the media, the second yatra for me during fieldwork revealed a significant shift in public sentiment. Ordinary people attended the events in substantial numbers, sharing their disillusionment with Modi and an increasing fusion with Gandhi and the script he offered as a viable alternative poised to fill the emerging political vacuum. The second yatra served as a strategic launchpad for Gandhi to test the electoral waters and shape the Congress party's campaign. His script highlighted critical issues like unemployment, income and wealth disparities, and the marginalization of Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs, women, and minorities by repeatedly taking a swing at Modi, the BJP, and their supporters.

³⁸ I witnessed a stark contrast in how two Indian political leaders handled protests. During a rally for Rahul Gandhi, I saw him calmly address protesters demanding quotas for police vacancies. In contrast, when I attended a Narendra Modi rally in Delhi, I was initially barred from entering because I wore a black kurta, symbolizing protest. I had to cover it with a scarf to gain entry. Later, when my scarf shifted, a BJP worker offered me a white t-shirt with Modi's face, saying black was undesirable. This experience highlights the differing approaches of the two leaders and their parties towards protests: Gandhi engages with protesters, while Modi's team seeks to suppress or hide them.

For example, at the [Malegaon roadshow](#) that I attended, Gandhi stated³⁹, “*Modi ji wants India’s wealth to go in the pockets of 10-15 people, [People shouting in the background] – “Sahi hai Bhai, Sahi Hai (Brother is saying right!). He wants billionaires like Adani.... Hindustan (India) has 22 rich people; their wealth is equal to the wealth of 70 crore people of India (50% of the population, 700 million) This is the situation of Hindustan. Look at media, airports, ports, power generation, cell phones. Wherever you see, you will only see these 20-25 people. Even the reels you watch on your phone for 4-5 hrs. Who is making the money? [The crowd responds with excitement] “Adani, Ambani.” Do you put petrol in cars? [The crowd energetically responds] “Yes!”. “Who makes money?” [The Crowd] “Same people,” “Adani.” Gandhi continued, do you eat Himachal⁴⁰ Apples? Who makes money? You walk on the street. Who makes money? Electricity rates keep increasing. Who makes money? So only those 20-25 people keep making money, and even the media shooting us right now keep working for these 25 people.... [Crowd cheers in agreement] They aim to distract people and never ask the real question. There are only three real questions in India today: first, unemployment (“Berozgari”); second, inflation (“Mehangai”); and third, “participation and ownership (“Bhagidari”).”*

Through his performances, he continuously introduced solutions to these three key questions, testing the audience’s response to his welfare schemes and policy initiatives in real-time. This iterative process, repeated across various audiences in India, allowed the political actor and his party to refine and tailor their election campaign script based on what resonated with the audience. For instance, during the yatra Gandhi’s relentless push for a nationwide Caste census, dubbed the “*Ginati Karo*” campaign, aimed to redistribute jobs, opportunities, and resources to marginalized castes in proportion to their population size. This message resonated deeply with the audience, who showed noticeable enthusiasm whenever Gandhi discussed it. By tapping into the power of social justice, Gandhi and the Congress party could craft a more compelling and relatable narrative as *Ginati Karo* became the dominant narrative for their electoral campaign, harnessing the energy of the crowd to fuel their political mobilization efforts.

³⁹ All of Gandhi’s speech videos can be found on the Indian National Congress Website – [Rahul Gandhi Speaks](#).

⁴⁰ The state of Himachal Pradesh is famous for its apples.

Setting the themes of the election campaign: Modi ki Guarantee vs Nyay Patra

The [Modi rally in Meerut](#)⁴¹, blessed by the divine legacy of Lord Rama, marked the commencement of the BJP's⁴² election campaign. The state of Uttar Pradesh holds special significance, being home to the newly built Ram Temple. Adding to the symbolic connection, the BJP candidate for Meerut, Arun Govil, is the renowned actor who portrayed Lord Rama in the iconic [TV series Ramayan](#), based on the ancient Indian epic Ramayana. The show, which originally aired in the late 90s, became the most-watched television series globally during its run and broke viewership records again during its re-airing in the 2020 coronavirus lockdown. The rally mise en scene celebrated the Ramayan theme⁴³, with die-hard fans venerating Modi as an incarnation of Lord Rama. The candidate, Arun Govil, too, was the embodiment of Rama, who began his speech by hailing “*Jai Shri Ram.*” To add more to this performance, a supporter in the audience [dressed up as God Hanuman](#)⁴⁴, the devoted disciple of Rama, added to the enthusiasm and became the center of attention. The event was a masterful blend of politics, culture, devotion, and entertainment, showcasing the BJP's ability to weave a compelling narrative around the revered figure of Lord Rama.

PM Modi's speech in this rally, and many that followed, consistently centered around the themes of development and creating an “[AatmaNirbhar Bharat](#)” (self-reliant India) through initiatives like [Make in India](#). He emphasized his support for farmers and soldiers by announcing the BJP's coalition with the regional RLD party. Modi assured the audience with his “[Modi Ki Guarantee](#)

⁴¹ Interestingly, PM Modi had also selected this same constituency as the launchpad for his campaign in previous national elections, underscoring its significance and strategic importance in his electoral journey.

⁴² On March 31st, 2024, with an announcement forming a coalition with the Lt. PM of India Choudhary Charan Singh Party (RLD, Rashtriya Lok Dal, a farmer's party).

⁴³ The entire tent was adorned in a striking white and bhagwa (orange) color scheme, complemented by vibrant orange flowers. In addition to BJP flags, pamphlets, and other campaign materials, many enthusiastic supporters waved bhagwa flags featuring an image of Lord Ram, further emphasizing the party's symbolic connection to the revered deity.

⁴⁴ For years, a [devoted diehard fan](#) has been a constant presence at PM Modi's rallies, always capturing the attention of media personnel. Clad in a Hanuman costume, the enthusiast carries a yellow “gada” (mace/club) emblazoned with ‘BJP,’ ‘Ram,’ and ‘Namo’ in one hand and a banner featuring Modi emerging from a lotus in the other. His giant lotus-shaped hat, complete with ‘Namo’ inscribed on the petals, symbolizes the BJP party symbol. A picture of Modi is proudly displayed on his chest, evoking the iconic scene from the Ramayana where Hanuman reveals Lord Ram and Maa Sita residing in his heart. This die-hard fan's unwavering devotion to Modi is palpable, with the leader's presence in his heart symbolically represented. Notably, ‘NaMo’ - the acronym for Narendra Modi - has become a popular slang, inspiring songs, hymns, and raps that echo his name.

Sankalp Patra” party manifesto⁴⁵ that several milestones would be achieved, including making India the third-largest economy soon, lifting 25 crore people out of poverty already, and moving towards its eradication, and implementing welfare schemes and policies to benefit the poor, such as reduced electricity bills, free rations, and healthcare policies for the elderly.

He also highlighted his vision for India’s global standing, aiming to establish the country as a “*Vishwaguru*” (world leader) with the motto “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—One Earth, One Family, One Future*” on [international platforms](#). Modi emphasized his commitment to combating corruption⁴⁶ despite facing backlash and exposed the opposition’s anti-national nature. Additionally, he outlined his plans for the first 100 days⁴⁷ after winning the elections. Finally, he showcased his government’s achievements, including constructing the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, where the deity was shifted from a temporary tent to a grand temple after 500 years. Furthermore, he highlighted the removal of Article 370 from the Constitution and the significant reduction in terror attacks⁴⁸ since he took office. Modi delivered a captivating performance on stage, resonating and fusing with the thousands in attendance. He assured the crowd that it was “*Modi Ki Guarantee*” (referring to himself in the third person) that he and his government would achieve all the promises in the manifesto and way more. The first reaction for anyone attending the Meerut rally would be to argue that the BJP might have a landslide victory. Modi had a powerful arsenal: well-oiled party machinery, ample resources, substantial funding, a dedicated cadre, and

⁴⁵ The BJP’s manifesto “*Sankalp Patra*” outlined 24 key promises and areas of focus, collectively termed “*Modi Ki Guarantee*.” The entire election campaign revolved around PM Modi’s persona, with party leaders emphasizing that the manifesto was crafted with the aspirations of people from all classes, communities, and regions in mind. PM Modi guaranteed the fulfillment of these promises, assuring party workers and leaders would work tirelessly to realize them. The manifesto’s 24 promises were repeatedly called “*Modi’s Guarantees*,” emphasizing his commitment to delivering these pledges. This slogan, echoed repetitively by Modi in rallies among party workers and supporters, conveyed his decisiveness and clear vision for India, distinguishing him from opposition parties, which were perceived as lacking a unified objective and vision. Using “*Guarantee*” underscored Modi’s confidence and assurance, implying a 100% commitment to his promises.

⁴⁶ Starting Enforcement Directorate (ED) investigation against many opposition leaders for money laundering and putting them in jail, including the Chief Minister of Delhi and leader of AAP (Aam Aadmi Party), Arvind Kejriwal, and Former CM of Jharkhand, Hemant Soren. This action has been criticized by the opposition and critiques of Modi as an act of cowardice and manipulation that he is doing so that they cannot go campaign and get votes. If these major regional contenders are in jail, it might increase the chances for the BJP to win more seats.

⁴⁷ This plan was put on hold after the election results, as the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had to accommodate the coalition partners, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) of Andhra Pradesh and the Janata Dal Party of Bihar, under its umbrella.

⁴⁸ Except for the Pulwama attack in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019, even then, Modi reminds the crowd that a stern response was given to those involved (this event was responsible for mobilizing the nationalist sentiments of people then, and Modi was projected as the efficient leader who could protect India from terror attacks).

captivating oratory skills. What poked a hole in the Modi-led BJP's watertight campaign and boosted the support for the INDIA alliance? Although there might be various reasons, this paper will continue to focus on Rahul Gandhi's performative aspect as a leader below.

On the same day that BJP launched its campaign in Meerut, in Delhi, the INDIA⁴⁹ alliance, led by Rahul Gandhi, organized a massive [*“Loktantra Bachao”*](#) ([*Save Democracy*](#)) rally against the “Abki Baar 400 paar” campaign of Modi, echoing the message of the Shivaji Park rally where the Bharat Jodo Yatra 2.0 concluded. This significant event brought opposition leaders together, emphasizing the need to protect the Constitution from the BJP's growing power. The rally's themes mirrored those in Maharashtra, warning that unchecked BJP power could lead to Constitutional changes favoring select groups, repetition of Kashmir-like incidents⁵⁰ elsewhere, EVM⁵¹ manipulation for desired outcomes, and targeting of state heads, civil society activists, journalists, and opposition politicians. The [*Delhi rally*](#) marked a turning point, overcoming skepticism about the alliance's viability after the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra culmination, where the leaders met in person for the first time. Modi and other senior BJP leaders like Amit Shah called the members of the INDIA alliance corrupt and an alliance of dynastic parties, who couldn't even decide on a PM candidate. However, this rally showed that opposition leaders recognized the necessity of a united front against the BJP's resources and power, and Rahul Gandhi's leadership seemed to have become acceptable to all the parties involved. The opposition's resolve became unmistakable that they would not retreat and fiercely challenge the BJP throughout the election, setting the stage for a contentious and intensely competitive political battle.

Interestingly, while Modi's speeches at the beginning of the campaign period were celebratory of what the government had achieved so far and lacked in-depth engagement with what each group would specifically get if the party won again, Gandhi's script focused on the party manifesto, the [*“Nyay Patra,”*](#) and showcasing how it would deliver on the promises made during the yatra. The manifesto was a culmination of the brainstorming sessions held throughout the yatra, making

⁴⁹ Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance.

⁵⁰ The abrogation of Article 370 and the removal of the status of Jammu & Kashmir by fully assimilating Kashmir in India and converting it into two Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. Rahul Gandhi kept highlighting that the rights of other states might also be taken away by making changes to the Constitution, the way the government did it for Kashmir amidst huge protests and uproar. It could still make that change because it enjoyed majority in the parliament to amend the Constitution.

⁵¹ Electronic Voting Machines

people feel heard and valued. Gandhi had taken a bold step forward by integrating “*Samajik Nyay*” (social justice) as a core pillar of its economic justice agenda. This commitment was evident in his promises during the yatra, which aimed to address the long-standing disparities marginalized communities faced. The party’s “*Five Nyay*” (Justices) catered to specific groups, including women, who would receive a monthly income for care work; youth, who would be offered government internships with vocational training; farmers, who would benefit from the Minimum Support Price (MSP); workers, who would see an increase in the minimum wage for NREGA workers; tribals, who would be granted land rights; and depressed castes, who would be afforded a caste census, redistribution of opportunities, and affirmative action. Gandhi’s performance of this script demonstrated Congress’ dedication to fostering a more equitable society. In contrast, Modi’s guarantees were limited to a ‘*pro-monopoly capital Vikas ideology*’ (*development ideology*) and a ‘[Uniform Civil Code](#)’ ([Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd](#)), offering nothing innovative or new to marginalized communities. The defusion with this vision for some people led them to consider the Congress’ script, which seemed to truly address their needs.

Gandhi efficiently took on the campaigner role, delivering a consistent 30-minute message that began with the urgent need to save the Constitution. The script stayed the same as the one he performed during the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. For instance, [in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu](#), Gandhi stated, “*Why do they need this 400 paar? Why is their slogan “Abki Baar, 400 paar?.... They are going to change the Constitution*”⁵² (an uproar among the crowd in agreement) He continued, “*The only thing Modi cares about is ‘having a monopoly on finances and the communication system (media) of this country* (the audience start pointing towards the media on the rally ground).” He further targeted Modi and alleged that BJP represents only “*one nation, one leader and one language*.” He promised that if elected, the INDIA bloc would take bold and decisive action to create job opportunities for the youth of Tamil Nadu, tackling the state’s employment challenges head-on. He stated, “*There are 30 lakh vacant jobs in the government, and these jobs will be provided to young people* (To which the audience celebrated with hooting, some people could be seen climbing the chairs and waving Congress flags with happiness)” Finally, hailing the leaders of Tamil Nadu, including Periyar, CN Annadurai, Kamaraj, and M Karunanidhi, he stated, “*You*

⁵² Hinting to the BJP contestant Jyoti Mirdha from Nagore Constituency in Rajasthan, who had recently stated that we need 400 seats to make significant changes to the Constitution.

have shown the rest of the country how to walk on the path of social justice. This was why Bharat Jodo Yatra was launched in Tamil Nadu.”

He rallied the crowd to join him in fighting against majoritarian forces, promising to empower them. Notably, Gandhi made significant compromises to ensure the success of the INDIA alliance, including seat arrangements and making Congress candidates contest elections only at [328 seats](#). He demonstrated respect towards all alliance partners on rally stages and performed small gestures of friendship for them (e.g., before the Coimbatore Tamil Nadu rally with regional leader MK Stalin, he gifted him sweets from a famous local shop), earning admiration from party workers and allies alike. He began to focus on strengthening the visual elements of his performances, explicitly addressing the weaknesses in the mise-en-scene that were evident due to the lack of cohesion among party workers at the beginning of the campaign. By addressing the weaknesses, he sought to project a united front among the alliance, fostering a sense of collective energy and enthusiasm during his performances. This, in turn, would amplify the impact of his message, creating a more robust and memorable experience for his audience.

For example, at Chandni Chowk’s Delhi rally, he stated, *“We have an alliance in Delhi; four seats are with AAP 56, and three are with Congress. I want to remind the workers to work together and vote for each other. We will press the vote buttons for each other. Our workers are forming a united stand in these elections because we aim to save this Constitution for people [He raised a pocket-sized copy of it, bound in red, symbolically emphasizing the document’s importance and its principles].* He continued, *“Ambedkar’s constitution, Mahatma Gandhi’s constitution, Nehruji’s Constitution, and Hindustan’s poorest, Dalits, Adivasis, and backward Constitution. Brothers and sisters, what BJP And Narendra Modi ji wants is for it to go away. Their party’s prominent leaders have openly said on TV that if given a chance, they will rip apart this constitution. So, the first job is to save this Constitution because this is the future, our dream, and the voice of our hearts. [People waving flags and cheering].*

This speech particularly points to how he mobilized the icon of democracy, the constitution, to rally the crowd. He brought the literal copy, incorporating it successfully to the mise-en-scene. Towards the later part of the speech, he celebrated the courage of the workers of AAP and Congress

by stating, “They’ve Kejriwal ji and Soren ji⁵³ in jail. Even in Congress, they have a list, one by one, they are taking them (workers and leaders who were quitting Congress to join BJP either because of better offer from BJP or because of pressure to be facing an interrogation and risk of going behind bars). Good for them, you take them, we have the fight to ‘Save the Constitution’ (raising the constitution in air again), we don’t need cowards, we need ‘Babbar Sher’ (lion). We have all of them here with me, they all are tigers, (pointing towards the workers on the ground). Send ED on them, send CBI on them, they are not scared. He concluded his performance with the statement, “We have broom (AAP symbol) in the symbol of hand (Congress symbol),” painting a vivid picture for the audience, envisioning a unified emblem that represented the shared struggle and solidarity between the two parties, leaving a lasting impression on the party workers in the broader audience. All started shouting in unison, “Rahul Gandhi Zindabad.... Zindabad Zindabad...” creating a moment of collective effervescence among the audience.

As the campaign progressed, these strategic shifts further enhanced Gandhi’s image, cementing his position as a leader committed to collaborative governance and social justice through a joint democratic struggle to save the constitution.

Desperate Measures: Modi’s Shift to Divisive Politics

As Modi and the BJP realized that Gandhi’s script of *the “Save Constitution, Save Democracy”* campaign, the “Ginati Karo” initiative, and “Nyay Patra” welfare schemes were gaining traction, they knew they had to act swiftly. Gandhi’s narrative resonated with the people, threatening to breach the seemingly impenetrable “Modi Fort.” To counter, the populist leader performed a more aggressive and divisive script, exploiting the “US versus THEM” binary to keep fusing with his audience that was beginning to defuse. In a shocking turn of events, Modi delivered the first communal hate speech of the 2024 election campaign season in [Banswara, Rajasthan, on April 21, 2024](#). This marked a deliberate shift in strategy, as the BJP realized that their initial focus on the Ram Temple, development, and “*Modi ki Guarantee*” was failing to garner the desired

⁵³ Arvind Kejriwal and Hemant Soren are the chief ministers of Delhi and Jharkhand. They were investigated by the ED (Enforcement Directorate) and CBI (Crime Branch) in money laundering and corruption cases and put in jail. The INDIA alliance leaders have condemned this action and called it the plan of BJP and Modi to put leaders behind bars under false allegations to reduce their electoral competition.

enthusiasm. The first phase⁵⁴ of voting saw low turnout, lackluster party worker engagement, and unexpected support for opposition parties from [certain tribes](#) and [caste groups](#)⁵⁵. Faced with the prospect of falling short of their target (above 400/543 seats), Modi resorted to exploiting religious fears, positioning himself as the sole protector of his supporters' interests.

At this rally⁵⁶, Modi stated, *“When they (the Congress) were in power, they said that Muslims had the first right to the properties of the state⁵⁷. This means that they would collect these properties and give them to the ones who have more kids⁵⁸ (insinuating Muslims). They will give it to the ghusapethyon (infiltrators). Do you want to give away your hard-earned money to the intruders? This is what the Congress Manifesto⁵⁹ says — the amount of gold owned by our mothers and daughters will be measured, collected, and distributed. They will distribute this wealth⁶⁰ among those... the Manmohan Singh government had said Muslims had the first right to the properties. These [urban naxals](#) will not even spare the mothers and sisters or their [mangalsutra](#)⁶¹. They will go that far. [[Website Link, cite it](#)]”*.

At another rally in [Anola, UP](#), on April 25th, 2024 he stated, *“When the SP[Samajwadi Party] Shahzade⁶² [Akhilesh Yadav] was in power, curfew was imposed here. Mothers and sisters used*

⁵⁴ Indian elections took place in seven phases, beginning on April 16th and ending on June 1st— the results to be announced on June 4th, 2024. Voter turnout in first phase was 57.87%, lower than the 63.71% turnout in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. – Election Commission Data

⁵⁵ A Rajput caste (Upper Caste, Royal, or the Kshatriya caste group) agitation started in parts of [Gujarat](#), [Rajasthan](#), and [Western UP](#). It extended to other states where the caste group was present.

⁵⁶ [Extracts from the speech](#).

⁵⁷ Former PM Manmohan Singh made a [statement](#) about all minorities in India and even released a press statement in 2006 stating the “First Claim on Resources referred not to any particular community but to the upliftment of all SCs, STs, OBCs, women and children, and minorities.

⁵⁸ The [myth about high population growth among Muslims](#) has been busted by many scholars and commentators.

⁵⁹ The Congress Manifesto doesn't mention anything like this. The PM also compared the Manifesto to the Muslim League's agenda, which is also not reflected in the Manifesto. Many journalists and newspaper analyses clarified this with proof. One such early analysis was done by Ravish Kumar. Though he is considered to be a Congress supporter, he has provided all evidence that shows these claims were false.

⁶⁰ The leader was targeting the Inheritance

⁶¹ In the Indian subcontinent, a mangal sutra is a necklace that the groom ties around the bride's neck during the Hindu wedding. The necklace is a visual marker of status as a married Hindu woman. It can be called the auspicious sacred thread that unites the two souls.

⁶² It means [“crown Prince”](#). Modi uses the term to refer to Rahul Gandhi and other young leaders who belong to political families to notify the presence of “nepotism” in these parties, who have never allowed a commoner to hold the reins of power.

to go out hiding the mangalsutra, and the Congress Shahzade [Rahul Gandhi] is now announcing to snatch the mangalsutra by applying an X-ray machine..."

In these extracts, it is the Hindu woman who is the target audience for this controversial content, whose most precious piece of jewelry, mangalsutra, a sacred thread that represents her marriage, would be taken away and given to the people with more children [Muslims] by the opposition. The small personal wealth she collected from generations would be snatched, and she could not give it to her children. The script of these speeches aimed to stir up anxiety in women electorate [especially Hindu women]. The aim was to make these portions of the speech go beyond the rally's limited space and fuse with the larger voter base. This US vs. THEM binary rode simultaneously on the two wheels of "fear" and "protection" by the populist leader, who generates fear and then promises to protect them from that fear, embodying "Them." These speeches added fuel to the ongoing fire⁶³ on the electoral battleground. This calculated move aimed to polarize voters, override regional conflicts, and revive the BJP's fortunes. However, this desperate gambit came at a steep cost, as Modi faced simultaneous backlash from the [opposition leaders](#) for these statements. Some media channels condemned these derogatory statements against a particular community, and most importantly, certain sections of the audience started becoming disenchanted and defusing with the performance of the leader, hence reducing his stature.

⁶³ In another [rally in Agra, Uttar Pradesh](#), on April 25, the political leader again stated, *"One of the Congress leaders is talking about conducting an X-ray of people's assets across the country. Whatever you earn, the Mangalsutra, gold, and silver our mothers and sisters have, Congress wants to seize them and distribute them among their vote bank supporters. Even the wealth left after you leave this world won't go to your sons and daughters. Congress wants to snatch more than half of your earnings. For this, Congress wants to impose an inheritance tax on you."* The leader also compared Congress's manifesto to the Muslim League's ideology.

Until May 15th, the populist leader kept repeating versions of these statements, after which he clarified his statement to say he never said Hindu or Muslim [though he continued with some form of the speech even after this statement]. Media and opposition are misrepresenting him and feeding words in his mouth. *He states, "I believe that people of my country will vote for me. The day I do Hindu-Muslim, I will be unworthy of public life.... And I'll not do Hindu-Muslim. It is my resolve."* [More extracts from the clarification interview.](#)

In a rally on [May 20, Jhargram](#), Modi again attacked Congress, saying the grand old party will snatch people's property and hand it over to those involved in '[Vote Jihad](#)'. The term comes from another term called, 'love jihad', meaning Muslim men lure Hindu women into romantic relationships under false pretenses to convert them to Islam. This issue has been raised repeatedly by Hindu groups and political parties, such as BJP, which is against it. Modi announced that it is up to the voters to choose "[Vote Jihad](#)" or "[Ram Rajya](#)".

Gandhi's Effective Counter-Narrative: From Humor to Empowerment

Starting with Bharat Jodo Yatra and continuing during the election campaign, Gandhi's script took a nuanced approach to form a counter-narrative to Modi's persona. He eschewed self-promotion and instead used humor and wit to critique Modi's personality, actions, and policies. By doing so, he engaged the audience and drew them into his narrative, which cleverly portrayed Modi as a performer rather than a genuine leader. Once he captured their attention, Gandhi conveyed his party's values and stance, creating a stark contrast to Modi's perceived theatrics. Notably, Gandhi allowed the script to subtly build his persona and character, letting the audience connect with him organically throughout the campaign period rather than actively trying to promote himself. This performative approach enabled a more authentic connection with the audience as they gradually came to appreciate his character and leadership style and started to fuse with it.

For instance, while continuing to perform the script highlighting the importance of a joint struggle to save the Constitution, when Modi's campaign performance started drawing on the binary of US vs THEM in Rajasthan, Gandhi initially condemned Modi's remarks as communal and divisive, then tackled the issue with humor and wit in his performances. He countered Modi's claims by saying, *"If the Congress wanted to target women's mangalsutras, we could have done so in the first 70 years after independence. Tomorrow, Modi ji might claim that we'll come after people's buffaloes, too - just because he says it doesn't mean we'll do it"*⁶⁴*[The audience erupted into laughter].* A vegetable seller beside me added, *"Tomorrow, Modi Ji will say Rahul will come to steal tomatoes from my stall. His desperation and fear of losing to Gandhi seem to be getting the better of him"* [Delhi rally]. Gandhi's script aimed to expose the absurdity of Modi's accusations while conveying that the Congress party did not intend to infringe upon people's personal freedoms or cultural symbols. Using humor, Gandhi sought to deflate the tension and highlight the divisive nature of Modi's rhetoric, and the audience seemed to be fusing with that narrative.

As Rahul Gandhi's campaign gained momentum, it became clear that he had refined his oratory skills and his [campaign team](#) was executing their strategy effectively. Around this time, to counter

⁶⁴ This statement was first given by Rahul Gandhi's sister, Priyanka Gandhi, at a rally in Uttar Pradesh, and then Rahul Gandhi repeated a different version of it.

Modi's divisive rhetoric of '*mangalsutra*' that was making allegations against the Congress leaders for snatching putting x-ray machines in people's homes and snatching away their hard-earned savings, especially the women - Gandhi introduced the catchy term "*Khatakhata, Khatakhata*"⁶⁵, cleverly turning the tables on Modi and the BJP's accusations. With a refrain of "*Khata khat khata khat paise ayenge account mein*" (Money will come into your account), Gandhi explained the Congress party's "*Mahalakshmi Guarantee*." This promise pledged to deposit Rs 8,500 per month into the bank accounts of one woman from every poor household should the party come to power. Later, he used the term to encompass various other schemes, including internship stipends for youth, Minimum Support Price (MSP) benefits for farmers, and higher wages for workers. By using the "Khata Khat" phrase, Gandhi emphasized that, contrary to Modi's claims, the Congress party aimed to empower citizens, especially women, by putting money directly into their accounts rather than taking it away. This clever messaging helped to reframe the narrative and showcase the party's commitment to empowering and uplifting marginalized communities. The term "*Khatakhata*" quickly became a rallying cry, electrifying the audience and inspiring them to chant the phrase in unison with Gandhi at rallies enthusiastically. As he uttered the words "*Khatakhata, Khatakhata*," the crowd would erupt in a frenzy of excitement, repeating the phrase with gusto, creating a contagious energy that spread throughout the gatherings. The phrase became integral to the campaign's narrative, symbolizing the promise of direct financial empowerment and resonating deeply with the people.

Gandhi's confidence in his performances surged as the election campaign drew to a close, prompting him to issue a debate challenge⁶⁶ to Modi. He responded to an invitation extended to both leaders by proposing a face-off, but the BJP countered by citing Modi's busy schedule and offering a junior leader as a substitute debater. Gandhi seized on this response, leveraging it as ammunition to energize his campaign further and deliver even more compelling performances. For instance, at the [Chandni Chowk](#) rally in Delhi, Gandhi stated, "*Modi Ji has four-five 'chamchas'*"⁶⁷,

⁶⁵ "Khatakhata" is a Hindi term that can be translated to English as "Direct Deposit" or "Money Transfer". The term has a catchy ring to it, making it a memorable slogan in Hindi. The English translations may not have the same level of catchiness, but they convey the same meaning. It can be similar to the term Cha-ching.

⁶⁶ Referring to the retired judge and a few intellectuals who had written letter to both Modi and Gandhi to organize a debate during the campaign period.

⁶⁷ Meaning a person who tries too hard to please somebody, especially somebody who is important. Here, Gandhi is referring to journalists who regularly interview Modi.

who ask him stupid questions like, Modi Ji do you eat mango? [The crowd breaks in to smile] He has conducted 30—35 interviews with the media, all sharing the same features of absurdity. What he is scared of, is coming to a debate with me [crowd cheers]. We are a democracy and should have leaders ready to debate. Do you think Modi Ji will come to the debate? The crowd shouted in response, “Nooooooooo!”. Gandhi continued with a smile: I’ll tell you why. The reason is simple. It’s because I’ll ask him what is your relation to Adani⁶⁸; why have you given all the defense, port, and infrastructure development contracts to him? Then I’ll ask him, why, when a particular company donated money to your party via electoral bond schemes, after a few days, their ED interrogation would be dropped? Then I’ll ask him when people were dying in Corona, there were bodies piled up in the Ganga River. Sons were looking at their parents dying, and you asked the country to beat ‘thalis.’ watch mobile phones and do yoga [people cheering in agreement].

The final element added to Gandhi’s script was a bold claim that he had influenced Modi’s campaign narrative, which served as another catalyst to galvanize the audience’s connection with him during the performance. By asserting that his message had already begun to shape Modi’s own campaign, Gandhi created a sense of momentum and authority, drawing the audience even closer to his vision and leadership. During the Delhi rally⁶⁹, he asked the audience, “*What do you want Modi to say in his campaign address? Tell me, I’ll make him say it in his address* [the crowd broke into laughter]. *I said in my previous campaign speeches, Modi Ji you don’t say the name of Adani - Ambani⁷⁰, you should take their names. After two to three days, Modiji even attacked his closest allies and mentioned ADANI-AMBANI, ADANI-AMBANI in all his speeches* [people cheering and laughing]. When the audience was utterly engrossed and reached the moment of collective effervescence at this moment, he quickly announced his Mahalaxmi Yojana, which

⁶⁸ India’s second richest person, an industrialist and a close ally of Modi – Gautam Adani,

⁶⁹ Another example of Modi mentioning Gandhi’s script is the use of the terms Khatakhat and Khatakhat. Gandhi used this term to symbolize the quick transfer of money in every poor woman’s bank account and youth’s account who would enroll in the apprenticeship program offered by Congress if they won. Gandhi mentioned how Modi ji is now saying this term in all his speeches. I think he needs to remember that the term represents money going in people’s bank accounts, which our party is promising. [Here, Modi was making fun of Gandhi in his speeches that just by making the sound, the money won’t get transferred but Gandhi turned it into a humorous situation.]

⁷⁰ Mukesh Ambani – Richest person in India and another industrialist who supports Modi and BJP.

aimed to make millions of ‘Lakhpatis’ (millionaires) contrast to Modi, who wanted only 20-25 millionaires⁷¹.

The lively debates, witty banter, and reciprocal discussions that characterize today’s parliamentary discourse in India have their roots in the campaign trail dynamics of this period. Although political actors weren’t engaging in face-to-face interactions, they had actively begun responding to each other’s arguments and allegations in their campaign speeches. Notably, Modi felt compelled to address Gandhi’s points, as the public had started taking notice of them. This campaign-trail sparring laid the groundwork for the adversarial exchanges that would later unfold in the parliament, setting the tone for a more aggressive, confrontational, and engaging political discourse of the present coalition politics in India. It was a harbinger that constitutional democracy would be performed once again in India, that it was worth fighting for with wit and humor.

Audience at the rallies

This section of the paper will delve into the diverse interpretative perspectives on the audience’s reception of Modi and Gandhi’s performances. Specifically, it will examine the three perspectives of audience members at the rallies who might have significantly influenced the election’s outcome.

The Enchanted

I call the first perspective the Enchanted, who are the Die-Hard Fans⁷² of the performance. This audience group formed a more significant portion of respondents at Modi rallies than at Gandhi rallies. They completely immersed themselves in the political actor’s performance, demonstrating an unshakeable and ardent devotion to the leader.

For example, a familiar spectacle unfolded for the die-hard fans at most of Modi’s rallies: In Delhi, when the leader took the stage initially or began speaking later, the crowd erupted into a frenzy. Thousands of enthusiastic supporters stood on chairs, waving flags and banners, including those featuring Modi’s image. The electric atmosphere, amplified by bombastic music, resembled a

⁷¹ Even those he attacked when he came under the pressure of losing votes in elections.

⁷² The Disenchanted and Unswayed/Unfused are other perspectives.

high-energy concert, with the audience fervently cheering for their idol. This collective frenzy created a ritualistic experience where individuals became one, swept up in a shared fervor. The carefully crafted mise-en-scene – complete with symbolic props and a charismatic leader-generated collective effervescence, where the boundaries between individual and community dissolved. I could observe even 70-80 years of people climbing the chairs with thrill and excitement, and if the leader were too far to be seen, they would just wave at his magnified version on giant screens placed at various locations in the ground. Once, a 75-year-old at Mettupalayam, Tamil Nadu rally had to be made to sit 7-8 times because she was blocking the plasma screen view for many behind her.

This enchanted audience develops a profound bond and personal identification with the political actor, and this personal affinity primarily drives their voting choice. Their loyalty is unwavering, and their decision-making process is heavily influenced by their personal identification with the candidate rather than solely by the party's policy or ideology. Their loyalty is often rooted in a strong personal connection with the leader's personality, charisma, and values, which can overshadow policy details or ideological nuances, ultimately influencing electoral outcomes.

For example, a doctor sitting in the VIP section at the Meerut rally told me, *“Omg, you have come from America to vote for Modiji.”* This assertion from the respondent was even after I informed her that I already attended 6 rallies of Rahul Gandhi and was doing a comparative study of both leaders in my research work. She continued, *“Today, my life seems fulfilled.... I've seen him up close for the first time. His face shines, and he emits so much positive energy. He has a PM's personality. No one can compete with him. In the past, we lacked a leader who could make such a profound impact. Now, thanks to him, our nation is revered and recognized globally, basking in the glory of his exceptional leadership.”*

As Modi stepped onto the stage, she sprang to her feet and requested the woman beside her to capture the moment on video, with Modi prominently visible in the background. She then live-streamed the footage on her Facebook account, managing to broadcast it just before the signal jammers were activated, effectively cutting off the transmission.

These enchanted supporters in the audience showcase their unwavering commitment to their leader's cause through various acts of devotion. They attend rallies and events with unrelenting enthusiasm, often traveling great distances and braving challenging conditions to be present. Perhaps most impressively, they volunteer their valuable time and energy to further the cause, often putting their personal interests on hold. For example, an auto-driver who drove for an hour to attend the East Delhi rally informed me about his tangible demonstrations of loyalty and exemplified the depth of his devotion and willingness to make personal sacrifices for Modi's vision.

He said, *"In the last elections, I used to drive an auto for BJP events and put Modi and BJP banners and advertising materials on the auto. The party used to pay me. However, not everyone gets a chance to be a part of this advertising team during each election. This time, they didn't ask me. However, as I have experience driving my vehicle with banners and speakers in crowded spaces, Congress offered me the job. But I rejected it. There is no chance that I'll ever drive for them. I might not get paid, but you can still see the Modi poster at the back of my auto and the Indian flag in the front. The money doesn't matter. Small sacrifices like that are nothing when it comes to providing the right direction to the nation. I'm glad to be making that sacrifice and proudly support Modiji"*

To this, when I asked him what matters to him. He gave me the example of improving India's image on world forums and how, in newspapers, he can read that Modi is visiting different nations and being respected by the world. He joyfully shared, *"Our culture and Hindu way of life have gained recognition worldwide due to Modiji."*

The Enchanted audience actively promotes and defends their leader through various channels, including social media, public forums, and personal conversations. They want their political actor to get rid of this corrupt system. Moreover, they tend to resist criticism or opposing viewpoints, becoming defensive or dismissive of negative information about their leader. A YouTuber, meme maker, and a single father who lost his wife during Covid in Tamil Nadu showed his extreme disillusionment with the DMK⁷³ ruled state government. He argued that *"I firmly believe that only*

⁷³ Dravida Munetra Kazagam, under the leadership of MK Stalin, joined the INDIA alliance.

Modi has the power to revolutionize our corrupt system. He has already brought about significant transformations in other parts of India, and we desperately need that same change here. It's essential for people to recognize this and give him an opportunity to make a difference. That's why I dedicate myself daily to supporting his campaign on social media." He even showed me his Instagram meme account and YouTube channel, where he posts engaging animated clips and videos highlighting Modi's strength and masculinity. These clips often feature Modi's younger, more energetic version, fearlessly taking on his opponents and being likened to a powerful lion-like figure.

When I inquired about his thoughts on the government's decision to imprison various heads of state on corruption charges during the election season, he replied with a smile, *"Those corrupt leaders deserve to be held accountable and face justice. It's not Modi ji who fabricated false charges against them. They themselves committed those heinous acts and exploited the system instead of serving the people. Now, Modi is rectifying that wrong."* His response conveyed a sense of satisfaction and approval for the government's actions, implying that the imprisoned leaders had earned their fate.

Demographically, a substantial proportion of these enchanted supporters came from upper-caste backgrounds. In terms of socioeconomic class, they predominantly hailed from either affluent (high-income) or economically disadvantaged (low-income) backgrounds, with fewer representatives from the middle-income bracket. This suggests a polarized dynamic, with both the relatively privileged and the economically marginalized being drawn to Modi's performance. The affluent supporters believed that Modi would propel India to new heights, rectify systemic flaws, and usher in an era of prosperity. In contrast, the economically disadvantaged supporters held a more personal conviction, trusting that only Modi could alleviate their struggles, transform their lives from misery to dignity, and empower them with a sense of respect and self-worth.

Although I also encountered an enchanted audience during Rahul Gandhi rallies, their enthusiasm and devotion paled compared to the fervor displayed by Modi's fans. The admiration for Rahul Gandhi seemed to stem largely from his family lineage, with many viewings him as the scion of the esteemed Gandhi family, the son of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and the grandson of

India's first female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Their support was rooted in a desire to see the Gandhi legacy continue rather than a deep-seated connection with Rahul Gandhi himself. A farmer from Nandurbar shared his heartfelt sentiments with me, recalling how numerous senior Congress leaders had visited his town over the years, even spending nights there. Having grown up watching them and hearing stories about past leaders from his grandparents and parents, he was thrilled to learn that Rahul Gandhi was coming to town. He eagerly accompanied me to the rally grounds from the market area, filming Gandhi's entire speech with uncontainable excitement. Beaming joyfully, he exclaimed, *"I cannot wait to share the experience with mother and sister... 'I'm a huge fan. He is even more humble and kind than when I saw him on TV.'"* His admiration for Gandhi was palpable, and the encounter left a lasting impression on him.

Loyal enthusiasts who were completely fused and enchanted during the performances are a vital pillar of support for Modi, but Gandhi's initial following didn't stem from this group. However, as some of Modi's devoted fans began to lose enthusiasm and faith in his performance, Gandhi saw an opportunity to sway the Disenchanted audience, making them the most crucial demographic for Gandhi, as they became the key to eroding Modi's support base and bolstering his electoral chances. Before moving to the Disenchanted audience in the next section and elaborating on the shift from Enchanted, Die-Hard fans to the Disenchanted, I want to substantiate my claim for the defusing of a group audience from Modi's performance with the help of post-poll survey results that showed that the "Modi factor" appears to have lost some of its luster in the 2024 elections compared to 2019. While enchanted audiences who completely identify with a political actor's performance still exist, their influence seems to wane. According to the [CSDS survey](#), the percentage of voters who viewed Narendra Modi as their preferred Prime Minister candidate decreased from 47% in 2019 to 41% in 2024.

In contrast, Rahul Gandhi's popularity as a preferred PM candidate rose from 23% to 27% during the same period. Notably, [the gap between the leaders narrowed by 9%](#), indicating a significant shift in voter sentiment. The survey uncovered a significant trend among BJP supporters, with 56% indicating they would remain loyal to the party even if Modi weren't on the ballot. This suggests a declining dependence on Modi's charisma and a growing focus on the party's ideology and

policy framework. The data points to a more complex political environment, where voters increasingly prioritize party platforms over individual leaders.

The Disenchanted

Recognizing this shift, Gandhi tailored his performative script to emphasize policy driven and empowerment narratives, moving away from the populist leader-centric narratives and appealing to a more discerning electorate. By doing so, Gandhi's performances sought to capitalize on this evolving political landscape. The simultaneous disillusionment with Modi and growing fusion with Gandhi's performance became starkly apparent to me through the responses I gathered at Gandhi's rally. As I interacted with attendees, it was clear that a notable shift in sentiment was underway - one that saw a waning enthusiasm for Modi's populist persona coinciding with a surge of interest in Gandhi's counter-performance that was based on the script of "*Saving Constitution, Saving Democracy*" and "*Ginati Karo.*" This convergence of disillusionment and newfound fervor was palpable, suggesting a significant political realignment in the making that today can be observed in parliamentary debates that the paper initially highlights. I interpret this group of the audience that defused with Modi and simultaneously fused with Gandhi's performances as the Disenchanted audience.

The initial segment of this audience comprised individuals who became disenchanted with the Modi campaign due to the BJP's prominent slogan, "*Abki Baar, 400 paar*" (This time, over 400 seats). As previously discussed, this phrase inadvertently sowed seeds of doubt regarding Modi and BJP's ambitions. This query effectively tapped into the growing skepticism, allowing Gandhi to resonate with and mobilize this disenchanted group. This argument resonated with various respondents I met on the rally grounds too. Seizing this opportunity, Gandhi astutely capitalized on this vulnerability by repeatedly bringing up a question in his script: "*Why do they need more than 400 seats? The only explanation is they want to change the Constitution.*" A young merchant navy officer from Uttar Pradesh erupted into applause, his eyes shining with excitement, as he vigorously nodded his head in total agreement, clearly resonating with Gandhi's argument.

I asked him, *“If Modi’s party succeeds in winning over 400 seats, what significant changes do you think he will implement?”* He responded, *“I once admired Modi, hoping he’d champion the marginalized castes, given his humble background and claims of being an Other Backward Caste (OBC) member. I was thrilled when Ram Nath Kovind, a Dalit, was elected President. However, Modi’s fixation on winning over 400 seats raises suspicions. The BJP’s parent organization, RSS, has never supported reservations and affirmative actions, and most Modi supporters are upper castes. As Rahul Gandhi highlights, upper castes predominantly own the media, industries, and businesses. Meanwhile, when Gandhi advocates for a caste census and redistribution of resources to ensure proportional representation. Why do Modi and the BJP find this problematic? Modi claims it’s divisive, urging Hindus to unite and vote for him. But what’s the value of this unity if it comes at the cost of our survival? Modi merely a ‘sevak’ (someone who performs seva) to businessmen like Ambani and Adani, prioritizing their interests over ours.”*

Another demographic that started becoming disenchanted with Modi’s performance was women voters. Initially, Modi’s performances attempted to fuse with them by highlighting his government’s efforts to empower women⁷⁴, symbolically featuring female party representatives on stage⁷⁵, and showcasing empathy and protection towards them. The populist leader even drew parallels between the women in the audience and his late mother⁷⁶, aiming to convey a sense of respect and commitment to their welfare. Till then, I could observe fusion between the leader and the women during the rallies. However, when the populist leader’s script started drawing on the binary of US (Hindus) vs THEM (Muslims), this group started defusing and became disenchanted with the populist leader’s performance.

⁷⁴ Modi stated at the [Meerut rally](#), *“We have transformed millions of sisters and daughters into entrepreneurs for the first time in the country, opening doors for them in the military and other professions. Whether it’s the police or paramilitary forces, today the number of women has more than doubled.”* *“Additionally, he mentioned the substantial increase in women joining Self-help groups and talked about the Namu Drone Didi Scheme, which is also set to change the fate of women in rural areas. [Cite Narendra Modi Website that shares the transcript for speeches]”*.

⁷⁵ At most of the rallies, a woman party representative invited the PM and raised the slogan “Modi” when he entered the stage.

⁷⁶ For E.g.: An interview of him with [Times Now](#) shows the political actor getting teary-eyed remembering his mother in front of the camera while responding to the interviewer, he said, *“This is the first of my life when I will go to file nomination without touching my mother’s feet,” [visibly getting emotional], he continued, “But a feeling also comes to mind that today, in a country of 140 crore Indians, millions of mothers the way they have loved me, blessed me [PM gets teary and emotional].”*

For example, A farm laborer in her late thirties, who attended the Banswada rally with her three children, including one with a physical disability, shared her disappointment with Modi's rhetoric. Modi had alleged at this rally, *"Even their previous PM⁷⁷ had once said that 'Muslims have the first right on all the resources of India'..... Congress and its leaders follow the appeasement policy."* He continued to state that *"Congress will put x-rays in their homes and take away people's gold and distribute it to the infiltrators (indicating Muslims)."* Despite initial enthusiasm, she felt let down by Modi's focus on divisive issues during the speech. She stated, *"I may not be educated, but I know Congress has never done that in the past, so why would they now? I was expecting initiatives to support people like me, but all I got was empty promises."* She acknowledged the BJP's achievement in building the Ram Temple but emphasized that it doesn't address her primary concern: feeding her family. She expressed her desire for tangible support, saying, *"I don't own a gold 'mangalsutra' or have any wealth. My priority is getting two square meals for my family."* She found solace in Rahul Gandhi's words, which recognized the value of unpaid care work done by women and promised financial support, including ₹1 lakh per year (\$1200) approx for poor women under the Mahalaxmi Yojana. She concluded, *"Gandhi understands our struggles and is the leader who truly empathizes with women like us⁷⁸."* Hence, Gandhi's policy-based script seems to have fused with this disenchanted audience group as well.

Beyond women and those wary of Modi's constitutional changes, another group of disenchanted audience were the individuals, who cherished secular values and Hindu-Muslim harmony, found Modi's explicit polarizing script unbearable. A bank worker at the Churu rally confessed, *"I was once an unwavering Modi supporter, captivated by his 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas⁷⁹' vision. However, his recent communal speeches crossed a line. Spreading hatred towards a specific community was unnecessary and unbecoming of the highest office in India. We're already polarized; we need a leader to restore harmony."*

⁷⁷

⁷⁸ Preliminary observations suggest that the disillusionment with Modi's narrative was predominantly expressed by women from lower caste, conservative, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Conversely, some women from upper caste or dominant OBC groups, who are also economically well-off, initially seemed to resonate with Modi's performance. However, a notable shift occurred as the Prime Minister's polarizing statements intensified, leading to a decline in support even among this demographic. The increased reliance on divisive rhetoric appeared to erode trust and enthusiasm for Modi's leadership, transcending traditional lines of support.

⁷⁹ The complete slogan is *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, and Sabka Prayas* " (Together with all, development for all and the trust of all' and with everyone's attempt).

When I asked his thoughts on Gandhi's campaign, he replied, *"I'm drawn to Gandhi's campaign and his slogan 'Nafrat ke Bazaar mein, Mohabbat ki dukaan kholne aaya hu' (In the market of hate, I've come to open a shop of love). India desperately needs this message. We're exhausted from the hate and violence. I once celebrated all festivals with my Muslim friends, but now we don't even speak. Gandhi's approach is a breath of fresh air."*

The final group that has become disenchanted with Modi comprises the dissatisfied lower middle class, working class, and some middle-class segments. Despite initially supporting the Ram Temple and identifying as nationalists who backed Modi's vision of India as a global leader, they now feel exploited. They believe Modi has only asked them to sacrifice and serve (sevak) while the rich, industrialists, and the poorest reap the benefits. A small-scale wedding planner in Nashik shared his struggles with me. He stated, *"I work multiple jobs - wedding planning, driving, and music. I also assist my wife with her tailoring business. Despite our hard work, we can't afford to educate our son in a good school due to rising prices. However, we are not poor enough to access the government schemes for BPL (Below Poverty Line) people. We see many educated youngsters in our neighborhood struggling to find decent jobs. Who is benefiting from Modi's claimed development? Certainly not us, who face rising prices and unemployment. We deserve a better standard of living, especially when India is becoming one of the world's largest economies."*

When asked about Gandhi, he replied, *"I never had high hopes for him, but he's now addressing our concerns. He's promising internships for youth, filling vacant government jobs, and providing financial support to women, recognizing the value of their unpaid work as mothers. This resonates with me, as my wife can't work outside due to childcare responsibilities."*

The final argument I want to make in this section is that Gandhi's counter-performance succeeded, but its purpose was not to create enchanted die-hard fans. Instead, he performed a script that aimed to shift the focus from single-leader-based politics to policy-driven, social empowerment based, alliance-centric political narratives. This is also evident in the alliance's decision to contest without a PM candidate, emphasizing policy and issue-based politics. The INDIA alliance coded BJP's *"Modi Ki Guarantee"* campaign as a personality cult in their script and attacked it by performing a joint struggle to save the constitution and democracy. Gandhi's performance sought to move

fuse with the Disenchanted block of audience, by promoting policy-based politics in his performances. In contrast, the BJP's campaign, led by Modi, focused on creating an enchanted audience through communal speeches and populist rhetoric, including Modi claiming to have been sent by God to take care of people. The Modi campaign's emphasis on personality contrasted with the opposition's script to bring Indian politics back to a coalition-driven, diverse, and competitive model, as represented by slogans like *"Haath Badlega haalath"* (*Hand (congress party symbol) will change the situation*) and *"Ginati Karo"* (*Do the Caste Census*).

Unswayed Clients

In the electoral context, I identify Unswayed Clients as the third significant audience group. This phenomenon involves a reciprocal relationship where individuals or groups (clients/voters) receive benefits, favors, resources, or protection from political actors (patrons) in exchange for loyalty, support, or services. Unswayed Clients demonstrate their loyalty by voting for patrons or their parties, attending rallies, or disseminating their message, often in anticipation of future rewards or favors. As previously elaborated in the paper, these incentives can include monetary benefits, food, transportation to rallies, or a fixed amount for voting. This dynamic prioritizes personal benefits and favors over policies or leader appeal, leading voters to support parties or candidates in exchange for tangible rewards rather than being swayed by policy platforms or charismatic leaders.

In India, this clientelism is further complicated by voters' caste identity, which also influences their electoral decisions. Voters are promised resources and services if they support their caste leader or a leader from their neighborhood, and a candidate from the local caste, religion, or community can more effectively deliver these promises, leveraging existing collective representations. Forming alliances with regional parties can be a strategic move for national parties to gain more seats. At the Nagore rally, a farmer shared his perspective with me, *"We're not concerned about the BJP or Congress. We vote for our local candidate, regardless of which coalition they join. He was previously with the BJP but has now partnered with Congress. We'll still support him because he's the one who genuinely listens to our problems and solves them, unlike the top leaders who only visit every five years for a speech and leave. He's accessible even*

at midnight if I need him.” Despite attending the PM’s rally, he affirmed, “I’ll still vote for Congress.”

Similarly, at the Modi rally in Delhi, a college girl revealed, *“We vote according to our guru⁸⁰’s instructions. Although my parents dislike Modi, our Guruji has asked us to attend his rallies and vote for him this time. We’ll follow his guidance because he takes care of us.”* These instances illustrate the significant influence of local leaders and regional alliances in shaping voting decisions

Another attendee at the Dhule rally shared with me, “Regardless of the party he belongs to, I’ll always vote for my local leader. He helped my mother secure a teaching position during a difficult period in our lives when no one else would lend a hand. I’m a huge admirer of Gandhi, and I’m thrilled that he has allied with my local leader’s party. I’ll definitely support them. However, my vote would still be for him (regional leader) even if he weren’t a part of INDIA alliance or he had joined the BJP. My entire family will forever be grateful for his kindness and support.”

In the 2024 elections, the Congress’ INDIA alliance may have utilized this model more effectively than the BJP. The reason lies in the fact that the BJP dominated the campaign rallies, overshadowing their smaller alliance partners. For instance, at the Meerut rally I attended, the BJP-RLD coalition was announced, but the entire event was heavily branded with BJP and Modi imagery. The logistics and management were handled primarily by BJP workers, leaving RLD workers struggling to gain visibility for themselves and their party flags. In contrast, Gandhi demonstrated a willingness to compromise and sacrifice a few seats to accommodate these smaller players. The Congress contested the fewest seats in history, making room for regional parties. Gandhi was seen showing solidarity with regional party leaders, ensuring they didn’t feel overshadowed. This approach allowed the INDIA alliance to build stronger relationships with regional partners. The unswayed clients noticed this move by Congress, acknowledging the sacrifice and supporting the alliance’s solidarity with dedication⁸¹.

⁸⁰ A local spiritual leader, who does substantive level of charity work in the village.

⁸¹ The survey results show that Congress allies could mobilize more voters than the BJP allies.

Hence, the 2024 Indian electoral campaign witnessed a pivotal shift in audience engagement as voters began to disengage with populist leader Modi's performances and increasingly resonated with Rahul Gandhi's counter-narrative. Despite initial weaknesses in Gandhi's campaign mise-en-scene, his willingness to challenge Modi's authoritarian regime and empathize with the people's struggles fostered a strong connection with the audience. As the campaign intensified, Gandhi's counter-performance effectively reframed the narrative, capitalizing on the public's growing disillusionment with Modi's government. Through his transformative leadership and captivating rallies, Gandhi successfully rebranded himself and forged a robust INDIA alliance, galvanizing a diverse coalition of supporters. As the campaign gained momentum, the audience's enthusiasm for Gandhi surged, indicating a significant shift in voter sentiment and ultimately thwarting the BJP's ambitions for an absolute majority, marking a notable dent in their dominance.