

UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF POPULISM IN INDIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

The article seeks to qualitatively explicate the surge of populism in India and its implications for the liberal democratic order. The interpretative understanding of populism emerged as a pivotal factor in the discourse on global affairs. As populism gained traction in other countries, it is pertinent to understand its theoretical application in non-Western settings. The study probes the discourse on identity construction, which privileges the notion of nationalism and religion to provide ontological security. Moreover, the role of digital media, as a causal factor, is also analyzed, which acted as a purveyor to reconnect with the people, bypassing the mainstream media. Historically, the Indian political landscape has experienced multifaceted strands of populism with their respective construction of social reality. In contemporary India, the growing current of populism is undermining the inclusive and accommodative decision-making through the construction of binary identities. The findings illustrate that the policies undertaken by populists undermine the democratic norms and secular credentials enshrined in the constitution. Subsequently, the conceptual interdependency between populism and democracy will be followed by policy recommendations to re-strengthen the functionality of institutions.

Keywords: India, Populism, Liberal Democracy, Relative Deprivation

Introduction

The multi-sectoral underpinning behind the modern nation-states, especially after World War II, based on religious and ethnic dimensions, needs to be examined to actualize the social reality based on changing epistemological position.¹ The modern political system, based on liberal parliamentary democracy, a notion of bureaucratic state system, encompasses fundamental freedoms and the monopoly of use of violence by the state to maintain the social order.² Consequently, the changing political nature in India is guided by right-wing politics that undermine the inclusive approach and promote policies based on the relational effect on different identities. Populist leaders like Narendra Modi strive to fulfill the imaginary space through the employment of different narratives, i.e., “nativism”, “religion”, and “nationalism”, for providing an ontological security.³ The populist leader situates the public under threat by mobilizing their discontent in the realm of different domains i.e. immigration and trade policies.⁴

The article seeks to underscore the rising tide of populism in India that undermines the fundamentals of the liberal democratic order.

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The deliberate framework in decision making and political debate through the maintenance of equal rights is the quintessential layout for the manifestation of democratic principles.⁵ However, it is equally pertinent to assess the voters' attitude towards political participation, which seems affirmative based on the analysis of populist attitude and its effect on their choice of vote for the BJP in the 2019 elections⁶. Along with the voters' attitude, the support for the BJP also comes from the "educated voters", who view Narendra Modi in a 'favorable' manner, according to the Pew Research Survey.⁷

The historical factor of partition along the religious lines, the constant state of conflict vis-à-vis neighboring state, i.e., Pakistan, the rise of Muslim political identities throughout the 1980s, and India's reservation policies benefited minorities, all contributed to the Hindu nationalists' consistent portrayal of majority Hindus as victims in their land.⁸ The economic dimension also illustrates the demand side of populism. The populist discourse argued that the economic-related factors, i.e., the rise of imported goods from low-wage countries, induced "geographical disparity" owing to automation, the impact of the Great recession, and the threat to the jobs of natives because of rising immigration, which contributes to the appeal of populism.⁹

After the advent of the BJP-led government in India, the historical legacy of inclusion over exclusion in a political setting has lessened to a larger extent. The legal, social, and cultural policies are derived to promote the anti-pluralist framework. The manifestation of populism in the twenty-first century is a global phenomenon supported by the prevalence of organizational bases and cultural factors that drive the legitimacy of the populist leader's stance.¹⁰

This study employs the conceptual assumptions of the interpretative paradigm to examine the rise of populism in contemporary India since 2014, and what are the ideational factors being employed by the ruling party, using legal and socio-cultural frameworks, to legitimize their exclusionary policies. The policies such as Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC),¹¹ and revocation of special status of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJ&K) have challenged the democratic values and secular credentials of India enshrined in the constitution. The populist policies will be followed by mediated populism to holistically explicate the phenomenon of populism in a non-Western setting.

Understanding Populism

The term "Populism" is conceptually and empirically applied to movements and parties that subsequently create binary identities between the "people" and "elite", differentiated based on the sphere of their influence.¹²

India is a multi-cultural and religious society, differentiated based on color, types of education, and patterns of worship, which makes it pertinent to apply the respective concept to analyze social context, ideational frameworks, mass response, and policies pursued. The populist leaders legitimize their discursive construction regarding the “forgotten people” who are dissatisfied with established institutions and political ideologies.¹³ The scholarly debate has been unfolding to empirically analyze the relationship between the communication tools and populist resurgence.

The technological modernization has blurred the line between the private and public spheres, which situates scholars to analyze both the content and form of populism. The political narrative of populism is subjected to binary identities based on multiple variables. Social media provides the leaders with a tool to project their content across a wider audience. The media landscape in India is diverse due to post-colonial changes in ICT and subsequently reformed after the advent of social media as a subsystem, which provided impetus to political leaders for communicating their victim-induced identity, as what is normally taken as “political” has widened its appeal through the transmission of content using social media.¹⁴

In the contemporary world, political leaders are changing their mode of media presence from traditional to new media. In a traditional media setting where authoritarian control limits the liberalization of democratic voice, the digital media can re-orient the relationship between the public and the political system.¹⁵ Moreover, the advent of social media qualifies the scholarly attention to analyze how the state, either democratic or authoritarian, is responding to the challenges posed by new media.¹⁶ In India, before new media, the conflation of private media at the behest of state-controlled media has changed the audience diversification. In a democratic regime, the media are used as a conveyor belt for ideologies.¹⁷

The phenomenon of populism can be approached using the interpretative framework in order to understand the social reality constructed by the populist. The leaders acquire the identity of the nation anchored in historical, mythological, or socio-cultural settings, which have been disrupted due to modernity, and that, resultantly, derive their legitimacy through discursive strategies.

Rise of Populism in India

The re-occurrences of populism in contemporary India can be attributed to multifaceted reasons such as the crisis of neoliberalism, dynastic politics, ‘affective’ rhetorical techniques, the rise of social media, etc.¹⁸

Social media plays a pivotal role in the actualization of populism because of its unmediated framework of discursive strategies, i.e., “Modi’s verbal radicalism” that reaches diverse social groups.¹⁹

The phenomenon of populism in the Indian political landscape manifested during the era of Indira Gandhi.²⁰ The left-wing populism in India shared its conceptual orientation with the populism of Latin America, where the leaders like Hugo Chavez and Juan Peron represented themselves as the true embodiment of simple and virtuous people.²¹

After independence, the state of India experienced periodic occurrences of populist aspects such as Gandhian and Dravidianist populism. Along with these political forces, the parties in regional states espouse populist rhetoric for mobilization based on language and caste groups that can be argued as a factor behind their lack of national appeal.²² According to Subramanian, behind the strength of democracy during the authoritarian rule under Indira Gandhi, when she proclaimed the emergency in 1977, the “populism of many of India’s language and caste parties strengthened democracy.” The strand of regional populism in India has provincial reach in contrast to the national outreach of populist politics by the Bharatiya Janata Party. The regional strand of populism in the politics of northeast states in India, which harbor different ethnic groups, has seen support for the BJP. In the elections of 2024, the BJP secured fourteen seats in Assam. However, the influence of the BJP is not limited to Assam, its influence also extends to Arunachal Pradesh.²³

The right-wing populism projected the renewed dynamics of mobilization based on nationalism. The populism under the BJP dates back to the 1980s, when the Operation Blue Star and the Shah Bano case galvanized the Hindu nationalists to voice their binary construction of identity based on religious dynamics.²⁴ This respective element equally augmented the communal violence that, since 2014, has re-shaped the relations between communities belonging to different religions. The BJP constructed the narrative of appeasement policies practiced by the Congress Party as ‘other’ in favor of religious minorities, which impacted the rights of the majority. Subsequently, the demolition of Babri Masjid and the Gujarat pogrom amplified the communal tensions in India.²⁵ Since the rise of the BJP in 2014, the thematic construction of “the people” as an in-group against the others and contemporary modes of communication have catalyzed the recurrence of populism in India.

- **Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 and National Register of Citizens**

The CAA amended the 64-year-old Citizenship Act by granting citizenship rights to religious minorities, i.e., Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christians

from countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, as stated in the original text.^{26 27}

The discrimination based on religion follows the populist construction of binary identity through discursive strategies. The discrimination undermines the secular principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Article 15 (1) prohibits the discriminatory factors such as caste, place of birth, religion, etc., by the state.²⁸ The National Register of Citizens will protect the non-Muslims who were excluded from the CAA.²⁹ The policy making with overt religious connotation would impact the democratic ideals and, likewise, disenfranchise the religious minorities.

- **Abrogation of the Special Status of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir**

The post-partition legal regime in IIOJ&K provided a special status concerning the state's legislation and permanent residency. During the second term of the BJP in power, the government scrapped the special status of IIOJ&K on August 5, 2019, which deprived the natives of their special status enjoyed under Article 370 and 35A.³⁰ The special status was granted in 1949, when the erstwhile princely state decided whether they accede to Pakistan or India. The Article 370 allows the IIOJ&K to have its legislative assembly and the entitlement to make laws except in the domain of "defense, foreign affairs, communication, and finance." Article 35A, introduced in 1954, primarily deals with the conditions required for permanent residency in the region.³¹ The abrogation of the special status of the Muslim-majority region would have security implications vis-à-vis Pakistan. The move was followed by an internet shutdown and restriction of movement, which violates fundamental human rights under the domestic and international covenants.³²

The move to repeal the semi-autonomous status would politically polarize the society and would be justified in the pledge made by the BJP in the election campaign leading to the 2019 general elections. The unilateral moves go against the spirit of UN-mandated resolutions and bilateral agreements. The democratic polity is expected to fulfill the legal and customary laws about international legitimacy. These populist actions illustrate the BJP government's policies with a religious undertone to legitimize their regime and implicate the security relations with Pakistan.

India treats the issue of the Kashmir dispute as an internal matter,³³ which goes against the liberal democratic principles of self-determination and protection of

fundamental human rights. Moreover, any unilateral move by respective states would jeopardize the prospects of future dialogue and regional stability.

- **Islamophobia**

The incidents in India ostensibly against the religious minorities exemplify the ingress of Islamophobia in the Indian political landscape. The narrative construction of Islamophobia dates back to 1925, when RSS was established to make India a “Hindu Rashtra”. The major ideologue of Hindu nationalism propagated the incompatibility of Muslim culture with the Hindu culture. The appropriation of political messaging based on Hindu nationalism was actualized by the political wings of the RSS. Islamophobia became more pronounced when the BJP came to power. The revocation of Article 370 and 35A is also premised on returning “exiled Hindus to the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir.”³⁴

Initially, the Islamophobic content circulated on social media after the government charged the attendees of Tablighi Jamaat as a “super spreader event” concerning COVID-19. Under the populist regime, the saffronization of politics inflames the communal tensions. The Home Minister of India, Amit Shah, in 2018 constructed the identity of illegally entered citizens of Bangladesh as “infiltrators”.³⁵ The religious-guided remarks would implicate the bilateral relations of India with its neighboring countries. The insubstantial response from the government would embolden the Hindu nationalists. India needs to rein in the polarized discourse to accentuate cordial interstate relations. Even though the BJP instructed the party members to be cautious with matters about religion, which bodes well for interstate relations but the test of Indian Muslims would likely be to continue under the Modi era.³⁶

- **Mediated Populism in India**

One of the basic drivers behind the emergence of populism is social media, which, through its ability and capability of user-generated content, has provided a transmission tool for the rhetorical application of populist discourse. The rise of Donald Trump in the USA, as a populist leader, is mediated by social networking sites, which amplified his xenophobic-based identity and perceived construction of enemies.³⁷ The populist leaders exploit the “integral crisis” using media narrative concerning failing economic policies, law and order situation, and alleged corruption.³⁸ The emergence of the BJP-led government under Narendra Modi is credited with the ‘Modi’s management’ of social media.

The use of social media by the Indian PM and its resultant popularity persuade the other political parties to maintain their presence on social media.³⁹

The contestation of identity on social media is preceded by how social media will be used for audiences with intended effects.⁴⁰ The critical studies have gone beyond the Lasswell conception regarding media and focus on dialectical processes in digital media.⁴¹ The tweets by PM Modi after 2014 are laden with messages that focus on global engagements.⁴² This shows that the populist leader tries to maintain the “internationalist” engagement amid the construction of conflictual identities. This phenomenon shows that the populist leader employs social media to “ostracize” others by communicating with a large number of people directly. For future assessment regarding the usage of media, the scholar argued that the possible increase in social media usage to propagate the “populism”, and due to a lack of digital media literacy, people will be vulnerable to the informational flow on the internet.⁴³

The employment of social media during the election campaign to mold public opinion, despite the prevalence of fake news and propaganda, enabled the political parties in India to reach out to the heterogeneous audience from the remotest areas. The youth engagement, especially first-time voters, in online polarized discourse has resultantly an increase in the 2019 general elections. The discourse on religious imagery in Indian politics was underplayed before the advent of post-Modi online content. The coupling of digital media and populist content has reformed the political narrative in India. In 2016, *India Today* revealed that certain IT companies are involved in the propagation of malicious content by providing services to political parties.⁴⁴ The PM of India interacts with voters through an application, “Namo App,” and also uses the application to project his success.⁴⁵ Moreover, Nai argued that populist leaders tend to employ negative and emotional rhetorical strategies in their political campaigns as compared to non-populist leaders.⁴⁶ The employment of social media by Narendra Modi to propagate political messaging also illustrated the symbolic value of modernity represented in political messaging.⁴⁷ Moreover, the content analysis of Modi’s online communication style in 2014 and 2019 illustrates the employment of populist strategies. Unlike 2014, in which Modi focused primarily on the “economic” aspect and attacked the “opposition”, the discursive practices in 2019 displayed elements such as “self-promotion”. The digitalization of populist discourse in media underscores the importance of social media as one of the significant tools to propagate ‘unmediated’ populist communication.⁴⁸

Populism in India: A Threat to Democracy?

The intercontinental surge in populist politics is undermining the norms of the liberal democratic order propagated by the West after World War II. The European countries are experiencing the realignment of popular support for populist political parties as compared to the last quarter of the 20th century.⁴⁹ The rise of populism didn't derail the democratic arrangement in the respective countries, but rather emphasized the re-politicization of policies previously shifted to non-elected institutions. The populist mobilization in the democratic polity would undermine the significance of state institutions. The strength of the institution is pivotal to check the ingress of populism. There are fundamentally two factors, i.e., institutional weakness and catastrophe/looming crises, considered behind the rise of populism. These two factors provide populist leaders with overwhelming support that gradually impacts the norms of a pluralistic society.⁵⁰

The polarization in the rhetoric by representing themselves as “the pure people” against “the elite” would lessen the relative trust of parties in the institutional checks and balances. The division of electorates into binary categories would make it seemingly unreasonable to challenge the policy mostly taken by the populist leaders, because such moves, even if they are taken to create a pluralistic society, would project the opposition as favoring the anti-common view.⁵¹ The populist wave has aroused concerns of democracy backsliding and a tilt towards more authoritarian rule. The democratic polity is premised on state institutions with substantial mechanisms for checks and balances of the executive powers, since both the parliamentary and presidential systems of government have fallen into the trap of populist downstream.⁵² The role of media and civil society is to bring into the light the discriminatory policies violating the rights of minorities.⁵³

The electoral success of populists is likely to occur in countries where the party system is volatile. In India, since independence, the one-party system became the mainstream narrative till the 2014 general elections, and the BJP-led government was able to disregard the opposition as pandering to elite interests and ‘minorityism’. The populists do not override the democratic setup, rather initially institutionalize their rule through elections and then gradually make legal avenues to dismantle the liberal and pluralistic order.⁵⁴

The BJP government also sought to undermine the effectiveness of civil society, which is undoubtedly considered an imperative part of the democratic system. During the BJP government, thousands of NGOs were unable to renew their license, a requirement under the FCRA to use foreign funding.

Not only are international NGOs at the helm of affairs by the state for the strangulation of civil society, the domestic NGOs also came under the radar of government surveillance. The offices of the NGOs that were working for minority rights, such as Amnesty International and the Center for Equity Studies, were raided by the Enforcement Directorate (ED).⁵⁵ The framing of anti-national and the employment of legal instruments to quell the civil society go against the public interest.⁵⁶ The asphyxiation of civil society in India would undermine democratic values.

In the democratic polity, the state is composed of respective organs which are mandated to perform their duties impartially and transparently. However, there are multi-faceted fault lines in Indian democracy, such as corruption, accountability, and communal divide,⁵⁷ which are further exacerbated due to the populist construction of state identity to reflect the ethos of the Hindu community. In the same vein, Indian politics is mired in populist discourse, which creates an imagined space for the majority at the cost of minority groups. The Hindutva-oriented political landscape is undermining the democratic and secular ideals of Indian society.⁵⁸ The result of undiluted power is the use of state institutions for the manifestation of the desired populist narrative. The democratic backsliding in India is evident from the enactment of policies with discriminatory clauses and undermining of UN-mandated resolutions.

As the populist wave has engulfed Indian politics, the state institutions must focus on their constitutional duties and uphold the beacon of impartiality and depoliticization. To check the authoritarian tendencies, not to hamper the functionality of institutions, is predicated on their resilience against populist tendencies.

Recommendations

It is pertinent to analyze the causes behind the rise of populism to provide policy recommendations for a pluralistic and collective society. Primarily, the political attacks of populists are on institutions and mainstream parties that are insensitive to the demands of the common people. The functionality of state institutions needs to be augmented with sustainable policy measures to pragmatically formulate the redistributive policies. The transmutation of civil society and other institutions for the propagation of political motives would suffocate the democratic values in India. A resilient and effective civil society would contest the divisive politics employed by the politicians. The protests against the CAA and other policy measures would also challenge the ethno-nationalist framework employed by the Hindu right.⁵⁹

The role of opposition parties is equally important to de-escalate the polarized rhetoric. The importance of unified opposition in a democratic state is essential to present

themselves as a significant political actor, i.e., inclusive socio-economic policies for sustainable development, in electoral battles. The electoral agenda of opposition parties must be broad enough to include the needs and diverse perspectives owing to the heterogeneous landscape of Indian society.

The state institutions, such as the judiciary, need to be depoliticized to uphold the fundamental rights of every citizen. Former Indian Chief Justice warned the courts of the onslaught of populism and also echoed that judicial independence depended on non-political appointment.⁶⁰

Political leaders need to play an important role in the articulation of the respective rights of minorities. The political leader needs to decouple the identity construction of 'national' with religious overtones, which would disenfranchise the religious minorities from their due rights. Hence, it is pertinent to explicate the demand and supply sides of populism to augment the required functionality of the state institutions to lessen the threshold for populist orientation on the political landscape.

Conclusion

Indian politics is experiencing the contours of populism that subjectively situates the masses with a sense of perceived loss. The phenomenon of populism is generally understood through an interpretative paradigm to accentuate the changing social reality constructed by the populists. The exploitation of public resentment against the system is possible through mediated political communication on digital platforms. The populist discourse in India employs the exclusionary characterization premised on religion and ethno-nationalism, which resultantly disenfranchising the religious minorities. The populist policies manifest in the public behavior that frames the "others" as anti-national. The research shows that social media provided an important tool to populist leaders to project their policies and legitimize their claims. The discourse shows that the seeping of the populist trend in India is impeding the state's ascendance towards democratic ideals. The employment of political rhetoric to legitimize the leader's ideational claims concerning social, political, and economic policies raises the questions of political representation in the changing contemporary landscape. The functional democracy with the provision of fundamental rights based on an inclusive approach is pivotal for peace and stability in India and also for regional security.

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