



SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC WELFARE AND INITIATIVES

H. No. 5-11-559, Srinagar Colony, Naimnagar,
Hanmakonda, Warangal- 506009, Telengana State (India)

Website: www.spwijournal.com

Email: spwird@gmail.com / spwi.ngo.2014@gmail.com /

devathsuresh@gmail.com

Ph: 9959026635 / 8790826635

SPWI JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL WELFARE

(A Multi Disciplinary Peer-Review Bi-Quarterly
Social Science Research Journal)

Volume 6 Issue 4, October - December 2023

(An ISO 9001-2015 Certified)

Editor

Dr. D. Suresh



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EXAMINING HINDUISM, HINDUTVA, AND HINDU POPULISM IN INDIA: A STUDY OF MANIFESTOS FROM RIGHTWING POLITICAL PARTIES



Dr. C. Srinivasa Raju

Regional Training Manager, Regional Centre for Training,
Dr. Marri Channa Reddy Human Resource Development
Institute of Telangana, Hyderabad
Collectorate Complex, Karimnagar, TS

Abstract: *Since the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), extensive discussions have revolved around Hindu nationalism. Prime Minister Modi's leadership has also prompted a surge in publications exploring Hindu populism. However, a prevalent issue in the existing literature is the failure to draw a clear distinction between these two concepts. Although Hindu nationalism and Hindu populism intersect, especially in the context of Modi's India and the BJP under his leadership, they are not synonymous. This article aims to delineate the disparities between Hindu nationalism and Hindu populism by analyzing the election manifestos of the Hindutva parties. Three Hindutva parties—Hindu Mahasabha, Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), and BJP—have gained prominence at the national level since independence. To assess these parties' stances, one manifesto from Hindu Mahasabha, two from BJS, and four from the BJP were scrutinized based on predetermined criteria established through a literature review. The findings reveal that while early Hindutva parties (Hindu Mahasabha and BJS) prominently espoused Hindu nationalism, Hindu populism was relatively subdued and sporadic. Intriguingly, the BJP displays a fluctuating pattern in Hindu nationalism, experiencing both ascents and descents, while Hindu populism exhibits a consistent upward trajectory.*

Keywords: *Hindutva, Hindu Population, Political Parties, RSS, Hindu Mahasabha*

Introduction

Prime Minister Modi's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has garnered widespread criticism for its perceived shortcomings. The second wave brought to

light deficiencies in his leadership style and his ability to address the challenges faced by India's 1.3 billion people. Many experts attribute these issues to his populist politics, drawing parallels with other populist leaders like Presidents Trump and Bolsonaro, who also struggled to effectively manage the pandemic (Santoshini et al. 2021). Alternatively, some critics point to Modi's Hindutva ideology, alleged disregard for science, constitutional secularism, and the divisive "othering" of minorities as factors that further divided the nation instead of fostering unity against the pandemic (Viswanath 2021).

Hindutva and Hindu populism have played a significant role in Modi's political success. Emerging from a humble background, he successfully challenged and dethroned the long-standing Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and their party, the Indian National Congress, which had dominated Indian politics for over fifty years. While Modi is not the first Hindu nationalist Prime Minister, he stands out as the first to employ both Hindu nationalism and populism in his approach. Despite extensive scholarly attention to Hindu nationalism, Hindu populism remains primarily explored as a supplementary aspect of Hindu nationalism or the broader global right-wing populist movement that has gained momentum in the past decade. There is a crucial need to delve into the history of Hindu populism in India and differentiate it from Hindu nationalism.

Religion and Population

The concept of populism is elusive and subject to ongoing debate. It transcends political affiliations, being adaptable to both leftwing and rightwing ideologies, and can either exploit the majority religion, escalating religious tensions or remain detached from religious considerations. Populism can manifest at national or civilizational levels (Brubaker 2017). Scholars have attempted to define it based on ideology, rhetoric, or policies, but its protean nature resists a singular, comprehensive definition (Yilmaz and Morieson 2021). To this article, populism is understood as a political approach that divides society into a corrupt ruling elite and an oppressed majority. This division may include a horizontal dimension, where the righteous majority feels threatened by both internal and external forces colluding with the corrupt elite. Temporally, populism often involves a rejection of the present while idealizing an imagined past and promising an impending future under the leadership of the populist figure.

Before the 1970s, secularization theory prevailed for almost a century, positing that religion would gradually decline as societies progressed. The assumption was that its role in the public sphere would diminish, while its presence in the private sphere would be limited. This idea seemed plausible as advancements in scientific and technological knowledge, pluralization of religious fields, functional differentiation, enlightenment, the theory of evolution, and other factors made modern individuals less receptive to divine certainties. However, the 1970s challenged this theory, marking a resurgence of religion not only in the private but also in the public sphere. Events such as the Iranian Revolution, the moral majority movement in U.S. politics, and the

rise of religious parties and fundamentalist movements globally signalled this shift (Grzymala-Busse 2012). The 1980s and 1990s further demonstrated the impact of religion on politics, with figures like Pope John Paul II, President Reagan, and Islamist mujahideen influencing the fall of Communism and the Soviet Union. These developments prompted Samuel Huntington's controversial theory of the "Clash of Civilizations," where civilizations were primarily defined based on religion (Huntington 1993). The 21st century, marked by the 9/11 attacks, refuted the secularization theory, highlighting religion as a significant factor in international politics, although some scholars still advocate for a diluted form of the theory.

Religion's growing prominence as a political ideology is evident globally, influencing responses to issues such as the coronavirus pandemic, migration, poverty, inequality, and discrimination. Major international conflicts, including India–Pakistan, Israel–Palestine, and the division of Ukraine, cannot be fully grasped without considering their religious dimensions. Notably, populist leaders leverage religion, utilizing its divisive binaries and "us-them" rhetoric (Yilmaz et al. 2021). According to Yilmaz and Morieson (2021), the association between populism and religion in various countries is attributed to populism's inherent tendency to align with "thick" ideologies, often combined with religion to consolidate power within societies where religion holds significant social influence. Populism's Manichean character, dividing the world into "good" and "evil," mirrors religious structures. Even when not explicitly tied to a religion, populism can function as a secular faith by sanctifying "the people" and positioning them against perceived "evil" elites.

The article then shifts focus to Hinduism, one of the world's major religions, examining its utilization by Indian right-wing political parties to promote populist politics. It is crucial to differentiate between Hindu populism and Hindu nationalism (Hindutva). Hindu nationalism asserts Hindu identity as the primary national identity, advocating for the assimilation of religious minorities into Hindu culture. Hindu populism, on the other hand, employs Hindu nationalism as the foundation for populist politics (Jaffrelot 2007). Despite significant overlap, they are distinct concepts; one can be a Hindutva politician without being a populist and vice versa. The subsequent discussion explores Hinduism's affinity with populism, recognizing that differences between religions may make some more suited to populist politics than others. The article then provides a brief history of populism in India, concluding with an analysis of manifestos from Hindu right-wing parties to understand the rise and fall of primarily Hindu populism and Hindu nationalism.

The Connection Between Hinduism and Populism

Is Hinduism truly a religion? This question may appear perplexing given the vast number—over one billion individuals—around the world who identify as Hindus. Hinduism holds the distinction of being the third-largest religion and the largest among non-Abrahamic faiths. However, a notable nuance exists, as many Hindus would refute

the notion of a distinct religion called Hinduism. Instead, they prefer designations such as Sanatana Dharma, signifying eternal order, way, or duty. Alternatively, some may refer to it as Vedic Dharma or even characterize it as Hindu civilization, culture, or a way of life. The ongoing debate surrounding nomenclature serves as a reflection of the diverse practices within Hindu Dharma. In stark contrast to Abrahamic or Semitic religions, Hinduism is characterized by an array of features—thousands of gods, numerous sacred texts, the absence of a clear founder, and a lack of consensus on origin stories or dogma. This intricate web of beliefs and practices has posed challenges for some, while others find it to be the very essence and beauty of Hinduism

Like all religious traditions, Hinduism exhibits a remarkable diversity. Yet, the nature of this diversity within Hinduism distinguishes itself in a truly unique manner when compared to other religious traditions. This assertion stems from the fact that Hinduism lacks a singular founder figure or foundational event, does not adhere to a universally accepted canon of texts, lacks a central credal statement, and operates without an overarching institutional structure. Unlike many other religions, there is no singular source of authority that universally applies to all Hindus throughout time. Consequently, any statement about Hindus or Hinduism necessitates some form of qualification. This distinctive characteristic has prompted some commentators, such as Heinrich Von Stietencron (2001: 33), to propose that our challenges would diminish if we were to consider “Hinduism” as denoting a socio-cultural unit or civilization encompassing a plurality of distinct religions (Jacobs 2010: 6–7).

The definition of Christians and Muslims is relatively straightforward, as they are characterized by their adherence to the teachings of Jesus Christ or Prophet Muhammad. However, defining Hindus proves to be a more intricate task due to the inherent diversity within the community. Experts face challenges in identifying specific qualities that universally apply to Hindus. While practices such as idol-worship, vegetarianism, reverence for the cow, belief in karma (the causality principle where actions lead to consequences), samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth), and moksha (liberation) are often considered essential to Hinduism, they do not constitute universally binding criteria (Flood 1996: 5–8).

In his book “What is Hinduism?” David Frawley delves into the complexity of defining Hinduism. He points out that while individuals can easily define the main principles and beliefs of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism by studying the lives of their respective founders, defining the essence of Hinduism proves to be a more challenging endeavour. Frawley raises important questions about the awareness of Hindus regarding the true nature of their tradition, emphasizing that the beauty of Hinduism lies in its resistance to simplistic definitions. Instead, Hinduism encapsulates the mystery, complexity, magic, wonder, and enigma of life itself (Frawley 2018: 40).

Scholars contend that the enduring strength of Hinduism as the majority religion in India, even after more than a millennium of subjugation, lies in its characteristics of

inclusivity, adaptability, and complexity (Tharoor 2018). Evaluating Hinduism based on criteria defined by Semitic religions is considered unfair by these scholars. In various aspects, Hinduism is posited as a more modern religion compared to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The term 'Hinduism' represents the world's oldest and still third-largest religion, boasting approximately one billion followers. However, it markedly diverges from the 'Abrahamic' faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—in fundamental ways. Referred to as Sanatana Dharma, meaning 'the Eternal Truth,' Hinduism stands out as a religion that is not ethnically exclusive. It sees itself as inclusively embracing the partial truths found in other religions from a higher, holistic perspective. In contrast, Judaism is both ethnically and doctrinally exclusive, while Christianity and Islam are characterized by ethnic inclusivity but doctrinal exclusivity (Wilberg 2009: 30).

Hinduism's distinctive features, marked by a lack of clear boundaries and dogma, set it apart from Semitic religions. Even on fundamental tenets, such as the concept of a creator or supreme being, Hinduism presents a myriad of options. The diversity extends not only to the multitude of gods but also to the varying relationships between these gods and the world.

In contrast to Semitic monotheistic religions, where God is envisioned as an omniscient, all-powerful Creator intricately involved with the world, Hinduism embraces a different worldview. The religious perspective in Hinduism does not centrally revolve around God or gods. Unlike in Semitic faiths, the purpose of the universe and the creation of human beings are not directly tied to God(s). This characteristic allows for a multitude of relationships between God(s), the universe, and human beings.

Illustrating this diversity, one Hindu tradition envisions a world dependent on God, yet God remains non-dependent on the world. The interconnectedness is emphasized as the world is depicted as god's body. Alternatively, another philosophy imagines God existing independently of the world, discarding the notion of the world as god's body. Yet another ancient tradition rejects the division between an independent god and a dependent world, positing that only one interconnected reality, Brahman, the supreme God, exists, while the rest is considered illusion (Saleem 2019). This rich tapestry of perspectives within Hinduism exemplifies its capacity to accommodate a wide array of philosophical viewpoints.

Balagangadhara, S.N. and the Ghent School assert a unique perspective, arguing that Hinduism, due to the absence of attributes such as a church, scriptures, and a belief in God, should not be classified as a religion. Balagangadhara contends that Indian traditions lack the defining characteristics that would categorize them as religious entities. From this viewpoint, Hinduism, as commonly understood, does not align with the conventional attributes associated with religions.

Balangadhara further proposes that the European understanding of Hinduism is not a product of projection or imagination but rather a shared ordered experience. Hinduism, according to this line of thought, is considered an experiential entity—a pattern that shapes the Western cultural experience of India. In this perspective, the very notion of Hinduism as a distinct religious identity is challenged, suggesting that there is no inherent Hinduism or unified Hindu identity (De Roover 2019). This viewpoint challenges traditional Western categorizations of religions and emphasizes the importance of cultural context in understanding and interpreting religious practices.

The central question at hand in this article is whether the plurality and ambiguity inherent in Hinduism make it a suitable vehicle for populism. Many scholars argue that populism generally considered a thin ideology without specific economic, political, or social policies, tends to utilize religion to bolster its rhetoric and provide a substantive program. Populist leaders, irrespective of their political orientation, often employ religious appeals to thicken their ideologies.

The demand for the imposition of religious laws or specific provisions, coupled with the exploitation of religious sentiments, has been a political strategy employed by numerous populists. This trend has been observed in leaders ranging from President Trump to President Erdogan, and Prime Ministers Modi and Imran Khan. Despite not being religious leaders themselves, these figures instrumentalize religion to lend an aura of respectability to their politics and connect with the historical struggles of religious leaders (Yilmaz and Shakeel 2021).

However, the instrumentalization of Hinduism presents a unique challenge due to its inherent thin ideology. The lack of consensus among Hindus on various aspects makes it difficult to formulate a cohesive platform. In response, right-wing Hindus over the past 125 years have sought to structure Hinduism. While extolling its all-encompassing and inclusive qualities, they attempt to unify Hindus around certain ideas, asserting a perceived threat to Hinduism. This includes emphasizing concepts such as cow protection, Ram/Krishna, Bhagavad Gita, Akhand Bharat, Hindi, and Ayodhya Mandir, and fostering animosity towards perceived foreign invaders (Doniger 2009, pp. 654–90).

Hindu nationalists have transformed Hinduism into a thick ideology, which is subsequently wielded by Hindu populists to advance their political agendas. This interplay between religion, nationalism, and populism underscores the complex dynamics within the realm of Hindu identity and politics.

Hindus subscribing to this perspective have, in the words of Amartya Sen, endeavoured to “miniaturize the broad idea of a large India—proud of its heterodox past and its pluralist present—and to replace it by the stamp of a small India, bundled around a drastically downsized version of Hinduism” (Doniger 2014: 144). This succinctly captures the notion that certain factions within the Hindu community seek to narrow

the expansive and diverse identity of India, known for its heterogeneity and pluralism, into a more confined version centred around a scaled-down interpretation of Hinduism.

Basu (2020: 1–10) characterizes this process of “miniaturization” as a pursuit of Hindu political monotheism, representing a prolonged evolution of Hindu political identity (or Hindutva) spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This endeavour is deemed essential for the establishment of a Hindu nation and a Hindu state. Tripathi (2009) provides a narrative detailing how Hindu extremists have gradually sought to mould the ambiguous concept of Hinduism into a structure akin to Abrahamic religions.

In a parallel argument, Romila Thapar contends that there is an ongoing effort to transform indigenous (Hindu) religions into a monolithic, structured, and uniform faith—a departure from the inherent diversity of Hinduism and the early culture of India. Thapar refers to this emerging construct as “syndicated Hinduism.” This term encapsulates the notion that attempts are being made to consolidate various strands of Hinduism into a unified, organized, and foreign framework, deviating from its historical and diverse roots (Basu 2020: 1–10).

The concept of “Syndicated Hinduism” heavily relies on the reinterpretation of Brahmanical texts, with the Bhagavad Gita being a prominent choice. This form of Hinduism defends the Dharma Sastras and emphasizes a brand of conservatism masquerading as a modern, reformed religion. The model for this reinterpretation is drawn from Islam and Christianity, both of which have centralized religious texts. In a quest for a central book, there has been a recent focus, particularly fueled by the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation, on the Ramayana. This renewed emphasis insists on the historicity of Rama, transforming him into a founder figure (Thapar 2000: 1047). This shift reflects an attempt to structure Hinduism in a manner reminiscent of organized monotheistic religions, deviating from its traditional, diverse, and decentralized nature.

The structured and syndicated form of Hinduism has not only laid the groundwork for Hindu nationalism but has also furnished a somewhat substantial or “thick” ideology to bolster Hindu populism. The amalgamation of Hindutva and Hindu populism, as embodied by Modi, is likely achievable due to the widespread acceptance of this structured Hinduism by millions of Hindus. This development is indicative of the maturation of Hindutva, which has played a crucial role in shaping and promoting a more organized and unified version of Hinduism.

The inherent amorphous nature of Hinduism, which traditionally did not lend itself to religious populism, underwent a process of “reform” and “uniformization” to align it more suitably with populist objectives. This transformation has made Hinduism more amenable to the goals of populist leaders like Modi, illustrating the dynamic interplay between religious identity, political ideology, and the evolving nature of Hinduism in contemporary contexts.

Evolution of Hindu Populism

India boasts a rich history of Hindu populism, a phenomenon that has been interpreted in various ways. In the Indian context, populism extends beyond merely challenging a perceived corrupt elite on behalf of the masses; it also involves the strategic distribution of freebies to secure votes. While this latter form of populism is often associated with southern states, notably Tamil Nadu, its influence pervades the entire nation (Subramanian 2007). A recent example of this populist trend emerged in the capital city of Delhi, where the Chief Minister faced accusations of engaging in such practices ahead of state elections (Pandey and Krishna 2020).

The enduring presence of populist politics in Tamil Nadu was evident in the lead-up to the May 6, 2021 elections. Political parties in the region engaged in a competitive display of promises, ranging from free laptops and colour TVs to grinders. In a novel twist, parties sought to appeal specifically to women, with initiatives such as actor-politician Kamal Haasan's pledge to monetize household work performed by women. Additionally, Dravida MunnetraKazhagam (DMK) chief MK Stalin announced a monthly payment of ₹ 1000 to women household heads if the party secured victory. In response, Chief Minister Edappadi Palaniswami of the ruling All India Anna Dravida MunnetraKazhagam (AIADMK) announced a competing offer of ₹ 1500 monthly for women if the party retained power (Chandrababu 2021).

Jaffrelot and Tillin (2017) take a moderate stance, incorporating the phenomenon of freebie politics into their exploration of populism in India. They delineate three distinct types of populist politics in the country, two centred around national leaders—Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi—and the third being regional, originating from the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Indira Gandhi's populism in the 1960s aimed at establishing herself as the rightful political heir to her father, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, overcoming senior leaders within the Congress Party. Nehruvian politics, marked by higher ideals, did not align with populism; it was the regional leaders who employed populist strategies to win elections. The second type, according to Jaffrelot and Tillin, is Hindu populism under Prime Minister Modi, to be elaborated on later. The third type is welfare populism in South India, characterized by cultural regionalist identity politics, freebies, and charismatic leaders like M.G. Ramachandran and N.T. Rama Rao rallying against the dominance of the northern Hindi-belt Congress Party.

Chakrabarti and Bandyopadhyay (2021), in contrast to Jaffrelot and Tillin, emphasize populist policies over the concept of populism itself. They align more closely with the popular Indian definition, where redistributive policies, particularly those not strictly growth-oriented, are deemed populist, especially when announced in proximity to elections. They briefly touch on Indira Gandhi's vote-attracting policies, the Congress Party's recent governance (2004–2014), and PM Modi's populist rhetoric, focusing on specific populist policies.

The existing literature, as discussed, lacks a concentrated exploration of Hindu populism. This article aims to address this gap by delving into Hindu populism across four chronological parts: the pre-independence period, the period from 1947 to the 1980s, pre-Modi BJP Hindu populism, and finally, an examination of Modi's Hindu populism.

Hindu Populism in The Pre-Independence Era

While delving into the extensive history of populism in India, Chakrabarti and Bandyopadhyay (2021) reference Mahatma Gandhi's self-sufficient agro-artisanal romanticism movement during the British Raj. They characterize it as populist politics, albeit not strictly populism. This prompts a crucial inquiry: "Was Mahatma Gandhi a populist or a Hindu populist?" Most scholars examining populism in India have generally dismissed this notion. Jaffrelot and Tillin (2017) provide a comprehensive overview of populism in India, commencing from the 1960s. Gianolla (2020) distinguishes Gandhian politics and (demagogic) populism, asserting that Gandhi's intercultural democratic discourse could safeguard liberal democracy from populist threats. Kumar (2019) also rejects the classification of Gandhi as a populist:

"Democracy and populism are cousins. A charismatic leader mesmerizes the electorate, strikes an emotional chord, and blurs the distinction between the leader and the leader. However, a charismatic-popular-populist pitch does not automatically transcend into populism. It requires demagoguery wherein hitherto suppressed but popular desires get articulated by a mesmerizer who emerges as the saviour. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were charismatic but not populist, as they assumed a guiding role vis-à-vis the people rather than getting subsumed by their worldview. Gandhi did not hesitate to withdraw from the non-cooperation movement in the aftermath of Chauri Chaura when it gained momentum, and Nehru stood for secularism and scientific rationality during Partition's mass frenzy. The popular and the populist can be perfect strangers or bedfellows, and their transition into populism lies in a social, political, and electoral mix."

Although there seems to be a consensus that Gandhi did not adhere to populism, certain aspects of populist elements can be identified in Gandhian politics. There was indeed a division between a small corrupt colonial elite ruling over millions of righteous Indian masses. A temporal dimension was present, envisioning the defeat of this colonial elite, leading to the attainment of Swaraj or self-rule, which was perceived as superior to the past. While Gandhian Swaraj extended beyond emancipation from British colonial rule, there existed an idealized, imagined past when life in ancient India was deemed perfect. Gandhi described Ramrajya (the rule of the ancient major Hindu deity Lord Ram) in 1946 as the "Kingdom of Heaven on Earth," expressing a desire to achieve something akin to Ramrajya in post-independence India (Gandhi 2021).

Additionally, although Gandhi advocated for the equality of all religions in the future Indian state and promoted a syncretic brand of Hinduism, he established and

lived in ashrams, practised yoga, dressed as a Hindu yogi, and spoke as a Hindu monk, articulating his views in a thoroughly Hindu style (Jaffrelot 2007). Unsurprisingly, some Indians, primarily a large section of the Muslim community, did not accept Gandhi's philosophy and politics. Accepting Gandhian populism, based on ancient Hindu history and Hinduism, might facilitate an understanding of the current success of Modi's Hindutva populism. However, a significant difference between populism in general and Modi's populism, in particular, and Gandhi's Hindu populist politics is evident. Gandhi's (elite or otherwise) enemies were not depicted as evil, and the Gandhian masses were not wholly innocent and pure. In Gandhi's worldview, non-violence was the ideal, with no place for military training to defeat or defend against enemies. This contrasted with the Hindu nationalists' Kshatriya model, which prioritized vigour, militancy, and domination (Andersen and Damle 1987: 26–29). A substantial part of Gandhian philosophy focused on self-control and subjugating one's own demons, distinguishing it from populism, where the emphasis is primarily on externalizing evil. The following two quotes underscore this difference:

"I compare nirvana to Ramarajya or the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.... The withdrawal of British power does not mean Ramarajya. How can it happen when we have all along been nursing violence in our hearts under the garb of non-violence?"

"If you want to see God in the form of Ramarajya, the first requisite is self-introspection. You must magnify your own faults a thousand-fold and shut your eyes to the faults of your neighbours. That is the only way to real progress."

The Manichean purity–impurity or morality–corruption distinction, characteristic of populism worldwide, is conspicuously absent in Gandhi's politics. Another factor that differentiated Gandhi from populist leaders was his support for strong party institutions (Congress) and parallel leadership (Jawaharlal Nehru) (Subramanian 2007). If Gandhi was not a Hindu populist, he was certainly not a Hindu nationalist. The primary proponent of Hindu nationalism was V. D. Savarkar and his party, Hindu Mahasabha.

Distinguishing Between Hindu Nationalism (Hindutva) and Hindu Populism, As Well As Differentiating Populist Political Leaders From Populist Parties.

Hindu nationalism gained popularity in the late 19th century, stemming from Hindu revivalist movements aimed at modernizing, unifying, and reinforcing Hinduism. These movements, such as Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj, sought to contemporize and consolidate Hindu identity. The British were viewed by these revivalist movements both as a source of admiration and a potential threat. These developments cultivated a Hindu consciousness that later evolved into the foundation of Hindu nationalism.

The pioneer of Hindu nationalism was V. D. Savarkar, who, in the early 1920s, authored the book "Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?" In this work, Savarkar linked Hindutva

not only to religion but also to concepts of land, culture, and language (Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan). He argued that a Hindu regards India as the land of forefathers (*pitribhumi*) and as a holy land (*Punyabhumi*). Despite his nationalist stance, there is ongoing debate about whether Savarkar's politics within the Hindu Mahasabha party can be accurately characterized as populist (Tharoor 2018: 40–50).

Savarkar stirred a significant portion of the population against the corrupt elite, with his primary targets shifting over time—from the British to the Congress, and later to Muslims. However, in terms of strategy and style, Savarkar did not fit the mould of a populist leader, refraining from attempting to lead an unorganized mass against perceived enemies through inflammatory rhetoric or discourteous behaviour.

Likewise, Savarkar's party, the Hindu Mahasabha, cannot be labelled as a populist party. It was not anti-elite but rather exhibited a pro-British stance. It relied on support from the Hindu aristocracy, gentry, and business elite, with urban, high-caste roots reminiscent of the pre-Gandhian Congress (Bapu 2013: 26–43). Consequently, the Hindu Mahasabha was distinctly Hindu nationalist but did not align with the characteristics of Hindu populism.

It is crucial to differentiate between right-wing nationalism and right-wing populism when considering these historical developments in Hindu nationalism. This distinction helps in understanding the nuanced dynamics at play during this period.

The dynamics between right-wing nationalism and populism are intricate, with the understanding that being nationalist does not always equate to being populist, and vice versa. The surge of right-wing nationalism, particularly since the 1970s, has been a global phenomenon. In Israel, for instance, thirty years of left-wing governance preceded the advent of its first right-wing nationalist government in the late 1970s. Subsequently, Israel has experienced a gradual shift towards the right, contributing to Benjamin Netanyahu becoming the longest-serving prime minister, yet his leadership has not been distinctly populist.

Similarly, the late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed notable right-wing shifts in both US and British politics. It is crucial to recognize that while right-wing nationalism has been on the rise, populism in the US and Europe is a relatively recent development. The ascendancy of right-wing populism has coincided with a less pronounced increase in left-wing populism.

Former President Trump exemplifies a right-wing nationalist populist, but it is essential to note that he was not the inaugural right-wing nationalist president. The Republican Party had long embraced right-wing nationalism as part of its ideology. Importantly, the distinction is made that nearly every right-wing populist is also a nationalist, but not every right-wing nationalist aligns with populism as a political approach. This differentiation highlights the diverse and nuanced nature of political movements and ideologies on the right side of the spectrum.

The discussion surrounding the ascent of Narendra Modi often tends to extrapolate Modi's populism to the early days of the BJP in the 1980s or even to the era of Hindu nationalists before India gained independence. However, as highlighted earlier, Hindu nationalism has roots dating back to the early 20th century, marked by the formation of Hindu Sabhas and the subsequent emergence of the first Hindutva or Hindu nationalist party.

While it can be argued that the Hindu Mahasabha may have exhibited populist tendencies, it is cautioned that categorizing all Hindu nationalist parties as populist solely because of Modi's populism may oversimplify the complex landscape of Indian politics. To establish a concrete link between Hinduism and populism since the early 20th century, one must define populism, establish a measuring scale, and demonstrate the presence of populist elements.

The assertion is made that Modi's populism alone is insufficient to label the BJP as populist before his rise to power. Some scholars contend that the BJP, in the period preceding Modi's leadership, was not characterized by populism. Notably, the absence of anti-elitism before 2013 is emphasized as a distinguishing factor.

Plagemann and Destradi (2019) put forth the argument that Hindutva, despite its inherent vagueness, constitutes the core and substantial aspect of the BJP's ideology, shaping the party throughout its existence. In contrast, (Modi's) populism is described as a "thin" ideology, a recent addition to the BJP's political repertoire. The uncertain fate of this populism beyond Modi's leadership raises intriguing questions.

The lack of rigorous studies on whether the BJP exhibited populist traits in pivotal years such as 1984, 1994, or even 2004 under Vajpayee and Advani underscores the complexity of the issue. It emphasizes the need for in-depth analyses and comprehensive research to determine the nature of the BJP's political orientation during these periods.

Political Parties and Leaders Embracing Populism

The differentiation between populist leaders and populist political parties holds paramount significance. Typically, populism is linked with charismatic figures like Trump, Erdogan, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and others. However, it is conceivable for an entire political party to adopt populism while its leaders may not, or vice versa. The emergence of both populist leaders and parties is often observed during periods of political system turmoil. This upheaval can span numerous decades, lacking a history of sustained stability, or it might manifest as a crisis within an established political system.

Since the 1950s, Africa and Latin America have seen the rise of populist leaders following prolonged instability or the conclusion of colonial rule. Examples include Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and Juan Peron in Argentina, demonstrating instances of populist leadership. More recently, populism has become associated with challenges to well-established political and party systems in consolidated democracies. This trend

involves a rejection of previously favoured political parties and constitutional frameworks. The rise of populists is attributed not only to the loss of legitimacy of individual political leaders but also to the erosion of trust in existing political parties, as emphasized by Roberts (2017).

Organizations Espousing Hindutva Ideology: Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS)

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has historically held and continues to maintain its position as the foremost Hindu nationalist organization in India. Its primary focus lies in fostering unity and character development among Hindus, perceived to have become weakened and disorganized during colonial rule. The RSS identifies evangelical faiths, Islam, and Christianity as the principal threats to Hinduism. Within its belief system, the RSS attributes the perceived weakness of Hindus to a lack of understanding and/or adherence to dharma.

While the RSS expresses concern about the contemporary decline of Hindu society, it traces this deterioration back to events more than a thousand years ago, particularly citing Muslim invasions and their historical control of India (Andersen and Damle 1987: 72). Founded in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar, the RSS, led by figures like M. S. Golwalkar from 1940 onward, adopts a hierarchical organizational structure with branches (Shakhas) proliferating across states, towns, and cities nationally. Notably, Hedgewar and Golwalkar were not populists; rather, they were organization-centric leaders with a Manichean perspective of a virtuous mass contending against a corrupt elite (Yilmaz et al. 2021).

Contrary to a populist approach of eliminating intermediaries and building a personal following, the RSS expanded through the establishment of branches, adhering to a structured organizational framework. Like the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the RSS experienced substantial growth in the 1990s and presently stands as one of the largest and most active non-governmental organizations (NGOs) globally. It boasts nearly 57,000 daily meetings, known as Shakhas, at numerous locations in India and abroad (Andersen and Damle 2019: 11).

The Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS) was established as the political extension of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) when, in the aftermath of Gandhi's assassination, the RSS recognized the need to engage in politics for its own safeguarding, especially in scenarios reminiscent of 1948. Another motivation was to provide an avenue for RSS activists eager to directly participate in politics (Andersen and Damle 1987: 112). The alignment of the Bhartiya Janata Party's (BJP) policies with those of the RSS underscores its association with Hindutva.

The leadership of the BJP, akin to that of the RSS, cannot be categorized as populist. Party workers tended to identify more with the party rather than with any specific leader, even though some leaders gained popularity. Despite being a significant ideologue of the Hindutva movement, BJS President Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, and later Prime

Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, did not adhere to populist strategies or styles, maintaining a focus on the party's principles and objectives.

Approaches: Identifying Political Parties With Hindu Nationalist and Populist Characteristics

Numerous articles have extensively covered Prime Minister Modi's adept marketing, combining Hinduism, nationalism, and populism. A wealth of literature exists on the surge of Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) since the mid-1980s. However, there is a noticeable dearth of articles that specifically delve into and compare the populism of major right-wing Hindu nationalist parties. This article aims to bridge this gap by focusing on the Hindu Mahasabha, Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS), and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). The selection of these three Hindutva parties is grounded in their noteworthy success at the national level, with Hindu Mahasabha, BJS, and BJP being the most triumphant parties in Indian national elections.

The choice of Hindu Mahasabha and BJS manifestos is determined by their availability, while the four BJP manifestos are selected to encapsulate each decade of the party's existence. Specifically, the first national election manifesto from 1984 and the most recent one from 2019 are chosen to provide a comprehensive overview of any shifts or changes in the BJP's ideals and promises over the years.

The chosen research methodology for this study is qualitative content analysis. A comprehensive examination of all seven party manifestos will be conducted, involving rigorous scrutiny and identification of statements/sentences about various facets of Hindu nationalism and Hindu populism. The cultural and related aspects associated with nationalism and populism are predominantly drawn from a PEW research study on European populist parties, as elucidated below.

Upon the collection of data, a thorough analysis will be undertaken, and conclusions will be drawn regarding whether and when the three parties were evolving towards increased or decreased Hindutva nationalism and/or populism. Despite being a quantitative study, the approach remains flexible, avoiding rigidity, and specific words or phrases are not merely counted. An analytic approach is adopted, recognizing that various aspects of nationalism and populism manifest differently in 2019 compared to how they appeared in the 1960s or the 1980s. This flexibility allows for a nuanced understanding of the evolving nature of these political ideologies over time.

The contention can be made that a more optimal approach would have been to compare BJP manifestos over the last forty years instead of juxtaposing Hindu Mahasabha and BJS manifestos with BJP manifestos. The rationale behind this argument is sound, considering a forty-year timeframe offers sufficient scope for in-depth analysis. While this argument holds merit, the decision to compare the manifestos of all three Hindutva parties is deliberate. The aim is to underscore and analyze the evolution of political rhetoric and promises related to Hindu nationalism and populism.

Acknowledging that the BJP plays the most significant and remarkable role in the Hindutva narrative, the comparative analysis encompasses all three parties' manifestos. This broader perspective is crucial for comprehending the exceptional nature of the BJP, as its past is integral to understanding its present trajectory within the Hindutva narrative. The decision to include Hindu Mahasabha and BJS manifests aims to provide a comprehensive view of the historical development of Hindu nationalism and populism across the spectrum of Hindutva parties.

Scholars have employed various methods to measure (rightwing) populism in political parties. In this article, a modified and less rigorous version of the PEW research and the Inglehart and Norris method, used for identifying European populist parties, will be applied. The focus of these methods is on anti-elitism and cultural views within populist political parties, utilizing a populist party scale developed from the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data. The CHES scale relies on expert ratings, aggregated to determine whether a party is populist and to identify its cultural orientation. Experts provide ratings on a scale of 1 to 10 for party positions on cultural issues such as support for traditional social values, opposition to liberal lifestyles, promotion of nationalism, favorability toward tough law and order, assimilation for immigrants and asylum seekers, support for restrictive immigration policies, opposition to more rights for ethnic minorities, support for religious principles in politics, and support for rural interests. To gauge anti-elitism, experts' perspectives on direct vs. representative democracy and the salience of these views are analyzed (Pew Research Center 2019).

In this article, most of the criteria mentioned above are utilized, with a notable departure in the method of assessment. Instead of relying on expert opinions, party manifestos are employed to determine the populism and cultural orientation of the party. The academic literature on political parties has a strong tradition of using manifestos to gauge party positions, as seen in studies by Kirchner (1988), Pennings (2006), and Libbrecht et al. (2009). While some may argue that manifestos may not fully reflect actual party positions, there is no foolproof method for measuring a party's intent. Alternative measures, such as leadership speeches, expert or voter surveys, or the analysis of previous policies, each come with their own limitations and shortcomings.

Anti-elitism and a distinct departure from the past are foundational aspects of populism. Therefore, two supplementary criteria, namely the disapproval of the constitution and proposed changes to it, and the utilization of the word "new," have been incorporated based on the reviewed literature on populism. Among these, anti-elitism stands out as the most crucial characteristic of populism. Populist leaders and parties consistently underscore their "newness," positioning themselves as a transformative force breaking away from historical norms. While some populist parties are newly formed, even those with a long history tend to highlight or exaggerate their perceived novelty. Manifestos, being laden with promises, frequently deploy the term "new" across various domains such as hospitals, schools, roads, laws, policies, airports, and more.

In this article, the analysis of the usage of the word “new” goes beyond mere frequency, delving into the context in which it is employed. The assumption is that populist party manifestos will employ “new” more broadly and expansively, encompassing phrases like “new India,” “new era,” “new polity,” and similar expressions. The third criterion for measuring populism involves assessing how frequently the name of the party leader is mentioned or whether a picture of the leader is featured in the manifesto. This criterion aligns with the key characteristic of populism—personalization and de-institutionalization of politics. Within populist movements, party campaigns shift focus from party ideology to the charismatic capabilities of the populist leader. Loyalties are directed more towards the leader than the party itself (Liddiard 2019). Examples like Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Jair Bolsonaro, Imran Khan, Viktor Orban, and Matteo Salvini illustrate populist leaders who have either established new parties or moulded existing ones in their own image. Thus, the personalization of politics and the elevation of the leader plays a closely linked role in populism.

Examining The Manifestos of Rightwing Parties: An Analysis of Hindu Populism and Hindu Nationalism

This analysis is grounded in the examination of manifestos spanning over fifty years from right-wing Hindutva parties. As previously outlined, the study encompasses all major rightwing parties, namely Hindu Mahasabha, BJS, and BJP. Given the significant evolution and success of the BJP over its forty-year existence, four of its manifestos (1984, 1996, 2009, and 2019) have been scrutinized. The inclusion of direct quotes from these party manifestos serves to illustrate the pronounced rightwing nationalism and populism embraced by these political entities. The initial nine criteria shed light on Hindu nationalism, while the concluding three underscores Hindu populism. Through the manifesto analysis, it becomes evident that while Hindu nationalism is on the decline, Hindu populism is on the rise within Indian right-wing parties.

Examining The Manifestos of Political Parties

Exploring the Hindutva (rightwing cultural orientation) of these parties, one can initially observe a decline in overt Hindu nationalism within their manifestos. The 1967 manifesto of Hindu Mahasabha, for instance, unabashedly advocates for “a Hindu state based on Hindu Culture and traditions,” aiming to Hinduize politics and militarize Hindus—an approach not echoed in the other manifestos examined in this article. In contrast, the 1967 manifesto of the BJS frames values associated with Hindu culture not as specifically Hindu but as ancient values encompassing all of India. The BJS aspires to lead India’s longstanding struggle, emphasizing it as a struggle for “Swadesh, Swadharma, and Swatantra” under Swaraj. The cow, in this context, is positioned not as a religious symbol but as a “national point of honour.” This trend persists in the BJS’s 1971 manifesto, where sentiments of Hindu supremacism or the aspiration for a Hindu Rashtra are notably absent. Instead, there is a discourse on “cultural heritage,”

Swabasha, and “Indianization.” While expressions of Hindutva still surface, such as a desire to protect the cow family, aversion to Christian missionaries and the Muslim League, and a proposal to establish Hindi as the lingua franca, explicit Hindu supremacist sentiments are less prominent.

In scrutinizing the manifestos of the BJP, the 1984 manifesto appears to mark a nadir in terms of its Hindutva orientation. In this manifesto, the BJP explicitly rejects the idea of a theocratic state, and the emphasis on tradition and cultural values is notably limited. Instead of pledging to introduce national, ancient, cultural, or traditional instruction, the BJP commits to providing non-denominational moral instruction. Apart from the prohibition of cow slaughter, there is a noticeable dearth of elements linked to Hindutva. Notably absent are the expressions of a desire for a uniform civil code and restrictions on Christian missionaries. According to Andersen and Damle (1987: 143), in the early 1980s, the BJP leadership sought to portray itself as a secular alternative to the Congress. Consequently, many of the demands typically associated with Hindutva were conspicuously missing during this period.

The 1996 manifesto illustrated that Hindutva had not only made a comeback but had also firmly entrenched itself in the BJP’s electoral agenda. In this manifesto, Hindutva was portrayed as a rainbow connecting India’s present to its illustrious past and charting “an equally glorious future.” Development, according to the manifesto, had to “accommodate the Bharatiya way of living, belief system, and values to reach the ultimate goal of Bharatiya.” All the hallmark issues of Hindutva, including the revocation of Article 370, the construction of the Ram Mandir, the adoption of a uniform civil code, and cow protection, were prominently featured. Among the four BJP manifestos examined, this document stands out as the most resolute in its commitment to Hindutva. In terms of overtly aligning with Hindutva, the 1996 manifesto is the most unequivocal among all the BJP manifestos analyzed in this article. This shift may have been influenced by the Supreme Court’s 1996 decision, which acknowledged that the term “Hindutva” was not specifically communal or tied to strict Hindu practices but rather associated with the “culture and ethos of the people of India” (Mahapatra 2018).

In the BJP’s 1984 manifesto, there is no reference to a distinct Indian or Hindu civilization. The 1996 manifesto mentions “our civilizational and cultural consciousness” only once. This narrative undergoes a shift in the 2009 manifesto, where a manifest commitment to Hindutva is replaced by a pledge to India’s “civilizational consciousness” linked to “India’s cultural and civilizational greatness.” The promises associated with Hindutva, such as the revocation of Article 370, the construction of the Ram Mandir, the adoption of a uniform civil code, and cow protection, remain the same but are now framed in a broader context.

The 2019 manifesto diverges from previous manifestos in two aspects concerning Hindutva. Firstly, the BJP’s Hindutva in this manifesto has reconciled with modernity. Unlike the previous manifestos (1984, 1996, and 2009) that criticized Western values,

emulation of the West, vulgarity, or alcohol consumption, the BJP, while still committed to India's civilizational ethos, does not specify cultural values it aims to preserve. Secondly, the 2019 manifesto broadens its criticism of Muslim concerns. In the case of Kashmir, not only is the abrogation of Article 370 of the constitution emphasized, but Article 35A is also targeted. Additionally, to "save" Muslim women from discrimination, the BJP pledges to enact laws ending Muslim practices of *Triple Talaq* and *Nikah Halala*.

To assess the rise or decline in Hindu populism, attention is now directed to the last three criteria. Examining the Hindu Mahasabha's manifesto, while there is a strong indication of populism regarding the disapproval of the constitution, the party falls short on the other two criteria. There is limited use or promise of a "new" India, and the name or picture of the leader is nonexistent.

In its 1967 manifesto, the BJS leaned toward adopting the mantle of a Hindutva populist party. It called for constitutional amendments and repeatedly promised a new era. However, the personalization of politics is absent, with Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya given less importance than the party. In the 1971 manifesto, the BJS's stance on the constitution advanced, calling for not only individual amendments but also a constitutional commission to review the entire constitution. Although the word "new" was used less, the BJS called for "a brave new India." Once again, the major deficiency in terms of populism was the lack of personalization of politics, with no mention or picture of party president Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The BJP was not always a populist party. In its 1984 manifesto, the first after its establishment, the BJP approved the constitution and used the word "our" to demonstrate a close relationship. Only one amendment was proposed, related to the removal of Article 370 concerning Kashmir. The BJP did not fare well based on the third criterion of personalization of politics. The president's name was mentioned only once, and there was perhaps only one picture of him, diluted by mentioning "collective leadership." However, based on the second criterion, the BJP exhibited populist tendencies by using the word "new" nine times, calling for a "new India" and a "new polity."

In the 1996 manifesto, the BJP's affinity with the constitution shown in 1984 was gone. Numerous constitutional amendments were proposed, and the word "new" was used ten times, calling for a "new direction" and "a new social, economic, and political order." Personalization of politics was again absent, with the president's name not mentioned and probably a single picture of Advani on the back cover.

In the 2009 manifesto, Hindu populism seemed to gain ground, with several proposed constitutional amendments. The word "new" was used 15 times, promising a break from the country's past. This manifesto also included names and pictures of current and previous BJP leaders.

The 2019 manifesto is the most populist, proposing numerous constitutional amendments, some of which are new. The word “new” is used 13 times, promising to establish a “New India,” with a significant emphasis on personalization of politics. PM Modi is prominently featured, with his name appearing 31 times and six pictures of him in the document, including one each on the title and last page.

From the above analysis, it is evident that the BJP’s current nationalist-populist framework was not always part of its strategy. Previously, the focus was solely on (Hindu) nationalism without much populism, as observed in the 1984 and 1996 manifestos. It is in the 2009 manifesto that a surge in populism is detected, and in the 2019 manifesto, Hindu populism is fully apparent.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion underscores the distinctions between Hindutva or Hindu nationalism and Hindu populism evident in the manifestos of the most successful right-wing Indian parties. On a broader scale, it emphasizes that while Hindu nationalism and populism currently coincide in Modi’s India, this alignment was not always the case in the past. The article delves into the instrumentalization of Hinduism, an amorphous religion ill-suited for a role as a “thick” ideology. Moreover, it successfully applies methodologies originally developed for European countries to unravel the complexities of Indian politics, nationalism, and populism.

Future research endeavours could explore the interplay between Hindu nationalism and populism in Nepal, the only other Hindu-majority state globally. The criteria framework established in this article holds promise for distinguishing between religious nationalist and religious populist politics in other nations. Many countries exhibit a fusion of religious nationalism and populism, with Turkey, under President Erdogan and the AKP party, standing out as a prime example. Like the Indian context, analysts often fail to differentiate between Muslim nationalism and populism in Turkey. In Europe, an examination of the manifestos of Poland’s ruling party, the rightwing Law, and Justice Party, could illuminate the rise of Christian populism and Christian nationalism. Lastly, scrutinizing the ascent of Jewish populism under former Prime Minister Netanyahu within the rightwing nationalist Likud Party could offer insights into how it contributed to Netanyahu’s extended rule, making him the longest-serving prime minister of Israel.

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