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Narendra Modi and India's Populist Democracy

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ABSTRACT

We need a new conceptual vocabulary to understand the subtle
yet substantial political transformation occurring in India under
Prime Minister Narendra Modi's National Democratic Alliance
government. I suggest that the most fruitful term is populism. Like
other populist democracies, India has experienced the growth of
executive power, heightened nationalism, and the attrition of the
autonomy and strength of key institutions. Like other populist de-
mocracies, this one is deeply suspicious of critics, be they scholars,
activists, or members of opposition parties and of those who are
deemed outsiders to the nation, namely Muslim and Christian mi-
norities and Bangladeshi immigrants. Part of the explanation for
the popularity of the current regime, I will argue, is that it appeals
to core democratic values by claiming to challenge entrenched and
corrupt elites in the name of popular sovereignty. However, popu-
lism truncates democracy because it rejects the values of pluralism,
diversity, and political contestation.

Keywords: democracy, populism, populist democracy, Hindu na-
tionalism, Modi, India

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Resumen

Necesitamos un vocabulario conceptual para comprender la transformación sutil, pero significativa que ocurre en la India bajo el gobierno National Democratic Alliance del primer ministro Narendra Modi. Sugiero que el mejor término es "populismo." Como otras democracias populistas, India ha tenido un crecimiento del poder ejecutivo, más nacionalismo y una reducción de la autonomía y el poder de instituciones clave. Como otras democracias populistas, esta es profundamente sospechosa de los críticos, así sean académicos, activistas o miembros de los partidos de oposición y los que se consideran como personas ajenas a la nación, es decir: las minorías musulmanas y cristianas y los inmigrantes. Yo argumentaré que parte de la explicación de la popularidad del régimen actual es que invoca los valores democráticos al decir que desafía a las élites corruptas y arraigadas en nombre de la soberanía popular. Sin embargo, el populismo limita la democracia porque rechaza los valores del pluralismo, la diversidad y la impugnación política.

Palabras clave: democracia, populismo, democracia populista, nacionalismo hindú, Modi, India

摘要

公众需要一个新的概念性术语，以理解总理纳伦德拉·莫迪政府（国家民主联盟政府）领导下印度发生的微妙又实质性的政治转变。作者认为，最恰当的术语是民粹主义。和其他民粹主义民主一样，印度已经历了行政权增长、民族主义提升、和关键机构自治权以及实力的削弱。和其他民粹主义民主一样，印度的民粹主义十分不信任批评家，比如学者、活动家或反对党成员、以及那些被视为民族外来者的成员—即穆斯林和基督教少数民族和移民。作者认为，当前政权受欢迎的部分原因是因为其声称以人民主权的名义挑战根深蒂固的腐败精英阶层，进而呼吁核心民主价值观。然而，民粹主义删减了部分民主内容，因为它拒绝多元主义、多样性和政治竞争。

关键词：民主，民粹主义，民粹主义民主，印度教民族主义，莫迪，印度

We need a new conceptual vocabulary to understand the subtle yet substantial political transformation occurring in India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. We must go beyond merely identifying and cataloguing the large number of specific developments since the 2014 elections, for our descriptors illuminate only part of a complex reality. For example, although it is accurate to characterize the government as Hindu nationalist, this term fails to capture many other important changes, most notably the weakening of representative institutions. Nor does it distinguish this Hindu nationalist government from its predecessor (the NDA led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 1999–2004). The term authoritarian accurately characterizes one aspect of Modi's leadership style, but it fails to appreciate a key reason for Modi's popularity: that many people consider him a simple, humble man of the people. More importantly, this description fails to recognize that India has resisted authoritarianism and, for all its flaws, remains a democracy.

I suggest that the most fruitful way of describing India today is as a populist democracy. It shares many features with other populist democracies, especially the growth of executive power and the government's purposeful attack on the autonomy and strength of key institutions, including the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the press, and autonomous civil society organizations. Like other populist democracies, this one is deeply suspicious of critics, be they scholars, activists, or members of opposition parties and of those whom the government deems outsiders to the nation, namely Muslim and Christian minorities and Bangladeshi immigrants.

Conceptualizing India as a populist democracy helps explain why Modi has remained so popular despite his failure to fulfill his most important campaign goals. Although he promised to engage in far-reaching economic reform, thus far he has been a cautious reformer. His promise to create new jobs has foundered. Growth rates are falling, even according to the government's own estimates, which predict that the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will increase by 6.5% in 2017–18 as compared to 7.1% in 2016–17 and 8% in 2015–16. Although the demonetization reform of 2016–17 is partly responsible for slowing economic growth—and has caused immense hardship—it has been extremely popular. India's typically vibrant civil society has only intermittently protested government actions.

Part of the explanation for the popularity of the current regime, I will argue in this paper, is that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Modi's leadership has accomplished the considerable feat of retaining an anti-establishment identity despite having become the establishment. The Modi government's major source of legitimacy is its (specious) claim that it is challenging entrenched and corrupt elites to return power to the people. Such claims are typical of populist leaders and regimes.

Populism has a contradictory relationship to democracy. On the one hand, it appeals to democratic principles by promising empowerment and encouraging popular participation. However, on the other hand, populism truncates democracy because it undermines representative institutions, civil liberties, and minority rights, promotes authoritarian leadership, and refuses to recognize the legitimacy of political contestation.

The remainder of my paper is organized as follows: The first section describes the core features of populism and situates my argument within the relevant scholarly literature. The second section explores various expressions of Indian populism and asks why Hindu nationalist populism has become its pre-eminent form. The third section analyzes Modi's leadership style and the BJP's populist actions in office. The Conclusion explores the relationship between populism and democracy.

Theories of Populism

The early literature on populism questioned whether it should be understood as a political, cultural, and/or psychological phenomenon, should be subsumed under other ideologies like nationalism and socialism, and was confined to particular historical and geographical contexts. Such debates reflected considerable scholarly hesitancy to define populism.[1] More recent scholarship converges in its focus on populism's ideational and discursive characteristics. Especially useful is Mudde and Kaltwasser definition of populism as "a thin centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will of the people.)."[2] Beyond that, however, Paul Taggart suggests, populism lacks core values; chameleon like, it adopts the colors of its environment.[3] Populism, like its invocation of the people, is such a powerful ideology because, as Ernesto Laclau argues, it is an empty signifier.[4] Lacking core values, populism often becomes attached to other ideologies. Right-wing populism has affinities with a form of nationalism that is anti-pluralist, anti-minority, and majoritarian.

An alternative approach characterizes populism sociologically, as a form of mobilization and a means of forging links between leaders and followers.[5] Some scholars emphasize the will of the people with scant attention to the role of political leaders.[6] Other studies address the ways charismatic leaders seek to gain or retain power based on direct, unmediated, and un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.[7] In fact, I suggest that the extent to which populism is associated with charismatic leadership is variable. There are examples today of leadership-driven populism, for example Hungary and the United States, and of populist movements that do not rely on charismatic leaders, such as Britain, Germany, and Denmark. The broader point is that populism is best understood by addressing both its

ideology and organization. One striking feature of successful populism is its ability to translate powerful social movements into successful opposition and later governing parties.

There has been extensive debate about the conditions that are associated with the global rise of right-wing populism.[8] Some scholars argue that populism has grown alongside neoliberal globalization, which has widened class inequalities, eroded social protections and job security, and reduced prospects for social mobility.[9] Neoliberalism has also opened national borders to free trade and immigration, enabling populists to gain the support of those who have suffered its harsh economic consequences and to blame job flight and immigrants for their distress. In the neoliberal era, populists tend to define majorities and minorities in ethnic and racial rather than class terms.

However, if there are broad links between the spread of neoliberalism and populism, there are significant national variations in their relationship. Populist movements have grown both in affluent societies with strong welfare systems and in poorer countries with scant safety nets. Some populists, like Narendra Modi, come to power by taking a pro-globalization stance and others, like Donald Trump, by opposing globalization. (To further complicate matters, both Modi and Trump have softened their initial views on globalization since attaining power.) Thus, some scholars argue that the more important explanation for the growth of populism is a cultural backlash against

social progress, multiculturalism, and increased immigration.[10]

Another possible explanation for the growth of populism is what one scholar describes as liberal democracy's "failing allure."[11] If the turn of the twentieth century witnessed the global spread of liberal democracy, the trend did not continue, contrary to Francis Fukuyama's famous prediction.[12] Rather we have witnessed the increasingly blurred lines between authoritarianism and democracy, or what Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way describe as populism and competitive authoritarianism.[13] One of the most useful ways of understanding populism is as "an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism."[14] In other words, populists recognize that its coupling with liberalism has truncated democracy.[15] They relentlessly critique established political institutions and promise to make good on democracy's highest ideals by eliminating the constraints that intermediary institutions create.[16] Populists are especially successful where corruption scandals and prolonged elite monopoly on power generate distrust of professional politicians and representative institutions.[17]

Populism's call for direct democracy offers a potentially more robust vision of democracy than what currently exists. For Ernesto Laclau, populism reflects a radical democratic commitment to mobilizing excluded groups and challenging the status quo.[18] The failure of democracies to achieve this promised vision provides an opening for populism. Benjamin

Arditi describes the discomfort that populism creates for democracy as akin to the drunken guest at a dinner party who disrupts table manners and rules of sociability. Given that the embarrassed hosts have invited the guest and can't eject him/her, they try to ignore their guest's antics.[19] In Arditi's reading, institutional checks and balances are the table manners of democratic politics that populists understand and disrupt.

However, the dark side of populism threatens liberal democracy by conflating the will of the people with the will of the majority and opposing the institutions that prevent the tyranny of the majority and protect (ethnic/religious/political) minority rights. In identifying a single and absolute common will, populists are intolerant of social and political pluralism. Some scholars describe populists as anti-political because they promote moral absolutes and deny the legitimacy of dissent and conflict.[20]

The most important form of populism in the past was left-wing populism and it found its fullest expression in Latin America. Today, right-wing populism has become ascendant, although the two forms of populism have emerged and grown simultaneously in some contexts. The differences between right- and left-wing populism concern their stance on majorities and minorities, defined both economically and politically. Pranab Bardhan notes, "[One strand of] populism is right wing in the sense of being both business-friendly and congenial to ethnic hubris and muscular nationalism."[21]

Indian Populism

I contend that while there have been diverse expressions of populism in India through time—both right and left; and of leaders, movements and parties—it finds fullest expression under the current Modi-led BJP government. One important reason is that Hindu nationalist populism is uniquely able to mobilize anti-establishment opposition while providing populist governance.

Three populist leaders in India stand out: Indira Gandhi, (1917–84), India's second prime minister; Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–79), who led a movement for total democracy against Indira Gandhi from 1975 to 1977; and Anna Hazare (1937–) anti-corruption activist at the national level since 2011. While all three were powerful populist leaders, each of them faced difficulties in translating their mobilizational abilities into governance.

Of the three, Indira Gandhi, the only head of state, enacted populist policies during her first term as prime minister.[22] As a left-wing populist, she appealed directly to the poor around a platform of abolishing poverty. Like other populists, she sought to weaken the press and judiciary, crush dissent, and achieve enormous personal power. However, Gandhi did not command the support of a social movement organization or a political party. Pushing aside rival Congress party leaders increased her power in the short run, but left her more isolated in the long run. After lifting the state of Emergency and calling

for elections, she could not call on adequate social movement support.

JP Narayan was an extraordinarily effective populist movement leader. However, his desire to remain an outsider to politics, his moralistic stance, and his rejection of representative institutions, contradicted his ultimate need to rely on a political party, the Janata Party, to mount an electoral challenge to Indira Gandhi when she lifted the state of Emergency. Furthermore, although the Janata Party, a loose coalition of parties that came together under a single banner, could win the 1977 elections, it was so factionalized and inept at administration that its government collapsed 2 years later. The Janata Party eventually merged with the BJP in 2013.

Anna Hazare spearheaded the India Against Corruption Movement in 2011. Although he preferred to work outside the political system, a rift with his associate Arvind Kejriwal, led to the formation of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) or Common Man's Party in 2012.[23] AAP won an overwhelming victory in the 2015 Delhi Assembly elections. However, it was soon torn apart by internal rifts which have continued to mar its tenure in office.

If Indira Gandhi was more effective as an isolated leader than as a movement or a party builder, JP Narayan and Anna Hazare were more effective as populist activists than as party or government leaders. Both gave expression to enormous popular discontent with the political establishment but could not translate their activism

into effective policies and administration. Neither the Janata Party nor AAP reconciled the tensions between their movement and party roles. It is also striking that because of their superior organizational skills and structures, the RSS and BJP were the major beneficiaries first of the JP movement for total democracy and later of the Hazare-led anti-corruption movement.

What has made the BJP such an effective populist party are its links to a social movement organization, its strengths as a political party, and, under Narendra Modi, its effective leadership. While all populisms aspire to tether social movements to political parties and to charismatic leaders, few have been as effective as the BJP in doing so.

The roots of the BJP's success lie in its close ties to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which was formed in 1925. The RSS has many populist features. It is rigid and authoritarian but invites identification with the common (Hindu) person because its *pracharaks* (members) renounce title and office and lead simple life styles. It considers society to be divided into two homogeneous and conflicting groups: Hindus/Indians versus minorities/outsiders. It expresses distrust of the political establishment, opposes representative institutions, and, until quite late in its history, opposed the formation of a Hindu nationalist political party. It describes itself as a cultural rather than a political organization. In fact, like many populist organizations, it is both an outsider and an insider to politics, as it is implanted in state bodies and civil society organi-

zations. The RSS also wields enormous influence over the BJP—from training its top-ranking leaders, to organizing its electoral campaigns, to shaping its ideology and world view. Absent the influence of the RSS, the BJP would not be a populist party.

One of the most important RSS branches is the Visva Hindu Parishad (VHP), its religious organization, or what I have described elsewhere as its social movement organization.[24] The VHP has contributed to the BJP's populism in two ways: first, by organizing protest movements that have employed religious appeals, an important feature of many right-wing populist movements. Second, the movements that the VHP and other Hindu nationalist organizations have led foster a sense of majority victimization that is a pronounced feature of right-wing populist movements. Thus, the synergies between party and movement have played a key role in the BJP's growth and continued success.

At the same time, the relative strengths of party and movement, as well as the extent of their agreement on policy matters, have varied across time and space. The relationship between party and movement was quite conflictual under the first BJP-led NDA government (2004–09). There are fewer movement-party tensions under the current NDA government, partly because of Modi's leadership.

It might seem surprising that the tensions among Hindu nationalist organizations have declined with Narendra Modi's rise. It may also seem sur-

prising that the RSS has strongly backed Modi, given its historical opposition to both globalization and the cult of leadership. Modi is the most powerful leader the RSS has ever spawned, and he was elected prime minister because of his pro-globalization stance. There are two major reasons why the RSS supported Modi's rise, both of which demonstrate that Modi is a populist leader. First, Modi has effectively combined the roles of mobilization and governance. If in most Indian states in which Hindu nationalists were strong, the party drove the movement or vice versa, in Gujarat, while Modi was chief minister, he drove both. There was a complete fusion of the roles of the BJP, RSS, and VHP under his command. This pattern has continued since Modi became prime minister. Second, Modi is a deeply committed ideologue. No Indian state experienced as extensive anti-minority violence in the post-independence period as Gujarat did while Modi was chief minister in 2002. Although Modi has not been prosecuted, several senior government and BJP leaders have been held criminally liable for their role in aiding and abetting or simply failing to stop the violence that claimed 1,000 mostly Muslim lives during this period.

The RSS is responsible for Modi's rise to power. It assigned Modi to the BJP in 1985 and supported his becoming general secretary of the party, chief minister of Gujarat, and ultimately prime minister of India. It shielded him from VHP criticism during his tenure as chief minister. It defended Modi's candidacy for prime minister when senior BJP leaders like LK Advani

Modi's self-description as *aam admi* (common man) differentiates him from the established elite. Before and during the 2014 election campaign, Modi continuously depicted Sonia Gandhi, Congress Party leader and Modi's main opponent, as being an elitist and a foreigner. He asked: "What kind of people are these Congressmen? They can regard an Italian woman as their own, but they find a son of the soil like me an outsider."[29] During the 2012 Gujarat election campaign, Modi declared, "I am the son of this soil. I was born and grew up there. I don't require your certificate of nationalism." In other words, Modi was claiming that Sonia Gandhi was not a true Indian despite her Indian citizenship, ostensibly because she was not born on Indian soil and was Christian. Modi's comments illuminate the connections between nationalism and anti-elitist populism.

As is typical of populist leaders, Modi continually presents himself as an outsider to politics and relates this, either directly or by implication, to being poor, uncorrupt, and ethical. In his speech on the 68th anniversary of Independence Day, Modi declared,[30]

> Brothers and sisters, I am an outsider for Delhi, I am not a native of Delhi. I have no idea about the administration and working of this place. I have been quite isolated from the elite class of this place but during the last two months while being an outsider, I had an insider view and I was astonished.

He repeated this theme in his interview with talk show host Arnab Goswami: "I do not have any previous baggage, because I've had a clean slate, I write everything from beginning and that has a benefit. Today we are building relations with countries across the world."[31]

Modi is an outsider to politics only in the limited sense that he is new to national politics; he was, of course, chief minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, first by appointment and later by election. By claiming to be an outsider to politics, Modi repeats the RSS contention that it is not political. He also echoes a view, rooted in Hindu philosophy and propagated by the RSS and VHP, that considers the world of politics dirty, corrupt, and unethical.

Linked to Modi's claim to be an outsider to politics is his self-depiction as being anti-political and ready to express unpopular positions because he is not primarily concerned with electoral success. By contrast, he claims, most political leaders and parties reduce democracy to elections. He describes himself as committed to governance and development rather than politics. He said, in his interview with Arnab Goswami:

> Those who have seen me in Gujarat, and those who have seen me in the last 2 years, those who see me without any bias, they will know that I am an apolitical Prime Minister. Apart from elections, I don't get involved into politics ever. You can call elections a necessity, a restraint or a responsibility,

we have to do it. I attend many functions, go to different areas, you wouldn't have heard any political comment from me. My focus is on governance. Country has been at greatest loss because governments were run only for elections ... You would have seen recently I urged everyone to pay taxes before 30th September. I even said it on Mann Ki Baat [Conversations from the Heart—a radio program] yesterday. Will a person, who is only concerned with winning elections, say that post 30th September you'd face problems?

Again, in a mode typical of populist leaders, Modi continually depicts himself as anti-elitist (and relatedly anti-political) by stressing his simple origins. During his 2014 election campaign, he seized on a Congress party leader's derisive description of him as a son of a tea seller and has since latched onto it. He organized a series of streamed conversations at roadside chai (tea) stalls as well as the radio series, "Mann Ki Baat." In one of his many speeches on this theme, he says "This is the beauty of India's Constitution, this is its capability which has made it possible that today a boy from small town, a poor family has got the opportunity to pay homage to the tri-colour of India at the ramparts of *Lal Quila* (Red Fort)."[32] In his speech at Madison Square Garden in NY, Modi said: "I am a small and insignificant person. My childhood, too, was insignificant. I want to concentrate on small things because I am a small person, who wants to accomplish big feats for other small people."[33]

The first speech invites "the common person" to identify with Modi and to believe that if Modi can accomplish such upward mobility, others can emulate his example. The second speech, while ostensibly about his insignificance, is of course exactly about its opposite. Modi's image on innumerable televised appearances, posters and social media, the wide circulation of Modi masks, and the promotion of Modi's distinctive *kurta* (shirt) all seek to promote identification with a man who appears to be both one of the people and larger than life. On a far larger scale than any previous leader, social media has also augmented Modi's leadership.

Modi's popularity has only grown since 2014. When the NDA government was elected that year, it controlled six state governments. Today, whereas the Congress party controls six state governments, the NDA coalition controls eighteen. What is especially remarkable is that there wasn't strong anti-incumbency sentiment or strong BJP regional leadership in many of the states in which the NDA won. The BJP's success was a triumph for Modi. The BJP's most important electoral gain was the 2017 UP Assembly election. Modi was the main face of the campaign and did not even announce in advance his choice of chief minister of UP. Both the scale of the victory and the size of UP make Modi's return to power in the 2019 parliamentary elections likely.

If Modi's populism helped him achieve power, it has become even more

pronounced since he has taken national office. There are several important indicators of this: first, he has backed away from his early whole-hearted commitment to neoliberalism and sought instead to combine pro-business, pro-market policies with attacks on the rich that are designed to gain the support of the poor. His demonetization reform, described below, provides an excellent illustration. Second, Modi has undermined the autonomy and strength of key institutions and suppressed dissent by identifying critics of the regime as dangerous anti-nationals. Third, since 2014 there has been a rise in anti-Muslim violence for which the BJP government is both directly and indirectly responsible. The BJP's vigorous and aggressive campaign for the 2017 Assembly elections in Gujarat was suffused with anti-Muslim sentiment. While there were many irresponsible comments on social media, Modi's own statements were no less provocative, for example, smearing Congress leaders by linking them to ISIS and identifying them with Mughal rulers.

On the first point, Modi campaigned on a center-right platform seeking "maximum governance, minimum government." Business elites assumed that he would engage in serious deregulation and economic reform. Modi has been cautious about doing so because he wants to maintain his anti-elitist, pro-poor aura. He has sought to combine pro-business and pro-market policies (new bankruptcy laws, reform of indirect taxes) with populist schemes (sanitation facilities, farmers' loan waivers, bank accounts for the poor). At the same time, he has been reluctant to undertake serious attempts to eradicate poverty.[34]

Modi's approach to poverty alleviation reflects his populist leadership style. The way he expresses his concern for the poor and for eliminating poverty appeals to the middle class and to a neoliberal ethic. Modi links his commitment to empowering the poor with attempts to hold them responsible for ending poverty. For example, "The poor is the central focus of my economic agenda. The poor should be strengthened in such a way that they get the willingness to defeat poverty ... we should make the poor strong so that they become partners in defeating poverty."[35]

Demonetization: A Populist Case Study

Modi's decision to demonetize the Indian economy displays many populist features: a moralistic decision-making style; insistence on a single right answer; rejection of political debate; direct anti-elitist appeals to the people; and conjoining of multiple issues including corruption, terrorism, and black money (income illegally obtained or not declared for tax purposes).

Also characteristic of a populist decision-making style, Modi acted unilaterally, without adequate consultation with governing bodies. He informed the Cabinet and the Reserve Bank of India just hours before delivering his speech on demonetization although it was a major policy initiative. Equally strik-

ing was the public response: although the policy was poorly implemented and caused enormous hardship, particularly for the poor, and despite serious questions about the efficacy of demonetization, the public has largely supported Modi's demonetization policy.

In a televised announcement on the evening of November 8, 2016, Modi declared that, at midnight that night, India's two largest currency denominations—Rs. 500 and Rs. 1,000 (about $7.50 and $15.00, respectively)—would no longer be honored. All Indians with cash in these denominations were given 50 days to exchange them at banks for either Rs.100 notes or newly issued Rs. 500 or 2,000 notes. People were only allowed to exchange Rs. 4,000 (about $60) per day. Demonetization removed from circulation about 15 trillion rupees ($220 billion), about 10% of the Indian GDP.

Modi addressed multiple audiences in his speech. He appealed to nationalist pride by praising India's economic success and boasting that the International Monetary Fund and World Bank agreed that India had become the "bright spot" in the global economy. He reassured the poor that the government was and would remain dedicated to them. He identified the major obstacles to India's achieving greater economic progress as black money, corruption, and terrorism.[36]

For years, this country has felt that corruption, black money and terrorism are festering sores, holding us back in the race towards development.

Terrorism is a frightening threat. So many have lost their lives because of it. But have you ever thought about how these terrorists get their money? Enemies from across the border run their operations using fake currency notes. This has been going on for years. Many times, those using fake 500 and 1000-rupee notes have been caught and many such notes have been seized.

Strikingly, Modi called on the poor rather than the rich to ensure the success of demonetization. He claimed that the poor had a responsibility to accept temporary hardships and become "active participants in the benefits of economic progress."

In a country's history, there come moments when every person feels he too should be part of that moment, that he too should make his contribution to the country's progress. Such moments come but rarely. Now, we again have an opportunity where every citizen can join this *mahayajna* [five daily Hindu domestic sacrifices] against the ills of corruption, black money, and fake notes. The more help you give in this campaign, the more successful it will be.

Modi cited examples of people's willingness to sacrifice for the national good:

Experience tells us that ordinary citizens are always ready to

make sacrifices and face difficulties for the benefit of the nation. I see that spirit when a poor widow gives up her LPG subsidy, when a retired school teacher contributes his pension to the Swacch Bharat mission, when a poor Adivasi mother sells her goats to build a toilet, when a soldier contributes 57,000 rupees to make his village clean. I have seen that the ordinary citizen has the determination to do anything, if it will lead to the country's progress.

Modi explained his unilateral decision by saying: "Secrecy was essential for this action. It is only now, as I speak to you, that various agencies like banks, post offices, railways, hospitals and others are being informed." Modi made the public feel included and valued by informing major institutions of his decision at the same time as rank and file citizens. Furthermore, the suddenness of the announcement contributed to a sense of Modi's heroism in pulling off this great feat. Modi later proved quite disinterested in the questions that institutions and individuals raised about demonetization. He ignored the Supreme Court's directive to the government to ensure that the common man was not burdened. When the opposition presented a report in parliament stating that demonetization would hurt both business and the lowest income households, Modi turned the issue into a moral rather than a complex political issue and claimed that opponents of demonetization tolerated corruption. He portrayed himself as a

can-do leader and critics of demonetization as elitist outsiders. He declared at a rally, "On the one hand are those who talk of what people at Harvard say, and on the other is a poor man's son who through his hard work is trying to improve the economy."

Surprisingly, the public was not outraged by demonetization. Most Indians, especially the poor, make commercial transactions using cash rather than credit cards. About 78% of transactions in India in 2016 were made in cash (compared with 20%–25% in the United States, Britain, and other affluent countries). ATM machines throughout India were depleted of cash within hours of opening and people waited in long lines for days on end to exchange their cash savings into the new currency before the 50-day deadline. However, while people expressed great frustration at the difficulties they were experiencing, they did not blame Modi.[37] One reporter observed:

> I found that despite the inconvenience they were undeniably facing, many people firmly stood behind Modi's decision on demonetisation. I spoke to nearly 40 people during the day, of which a majority told me they saw their inconvenience as a localised one. "*Ye toh bank wale hume pareshan kar rahen hai, warna Modi ne toh thik hi kiya hai*"—It is the people from the bank who are troubling us, otherwise Modi took the right decision, several said. Many workers and labourers I spoke

to, like Muhammad, said the move was painful, but they saw it as a shared burden and didn't blame the government.

Modi asked citizens to respond to a survey on demonetization on the Narendra Modi App. The government reports that 500,000 respondents took part in the exercise; over 93% of the respondents supported demonetization; only 2% opposed it.[38]

Clearly this information is partial. The respondents were likely urban middle and lower middle-class people who could afford a smart phone or internet connection. The framing of the question was designed to solicit positive responses. However, other surveys have also found that there was broad support for demonetization. In one of them, 85% of respondents believed that the move was hurting those with black money and 85% felt the inconvenience caused by demonetization was worth the effort of fighting black money; at the same time, 74% of respondents felt that demonetization could have been implemented better.[39] It's possible that demonetization appealed to the poor because they thought Modi was punishing the rich, and the reform thereby contributed to Modi's anti-elitist aura.

To summarize, there is a striking contrast between Modi's grand claims that demonetization would stop terrorism, corruption, and the flow of black money and its short-term effects, which were to slow growth rates and burden the poor. Prabhat Patnaik points out that Modi assumed that black money consists of hordes of cash that people hide in their trunks and pillow cases when, in fact, it consists of a wide range of activities only some of which are illegal. Moreover, much corrupt and illegal finance, for example, deposits in foreign bank accounts, is not affected by the reform. Patnaik also notes that demonetization is not, as its advocates claim, a "surgical strike against terrorism." Fake currency notes could have been printed across the border and new legal notes could have been introduced gradually and unobtrusively.[40] Yet Modi's populist appeals persuaded most people that their sacrifices and hardships were worthwhile for they would contribute to national well-being.

The Expansion of Executive Power

The BJP's populism rests on the sheer power it currently commands. It is the single largest party in both houses of Indian Parliament (though it doesn't have a majority in the weaker upper house). It nominated both India's President and Vice President. The president's role is largely ceremonial, except during crises and parliamentary instability, when he or she can decide which political party should form a government. The government has also placed its political appointees in institutions that are designed to check executive power. For example, it appointed BJP vice president Avinash Rai Khanna to the National Human Rights Commission, which is responsible for overseeing human rights violations. Khanna was BJP leader in Jammu and Kashmir, the site of some of the gravest human

rights violations (often perpetrated by the government).

In keeping with other powerful populist leaders, Modi has expanded executive power. Consider one significant example: the government's amendments to the 2017 budget. First, they enable the government to make rules concerning the qualifications, appointments, term of office, salaries and allowances, resignation, removal, and other conditions of service for members of tribunals, which are quasi-judicial boards that review appeals of regulatory decisions. Second, they expand the power of income-tax officials by enabling them to conduct searches and seizures without a rationale or judicial oversight. Moreover, the government made this rule apply retroactively, so that tax officials are authorized to investigate alleged violations dating back 55 years. Given the politically motivated character of income tax investigations, this reform has very serious consequences.

Third, the bills removed the cap on donations by Indian corporations to political parties and stipulated that donations can be anonymous. This replaces an earlier requirement that corporations make public their political contributions. An analysis by the Stockholm-based NGO International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance finds that India is among a mere 10% of the countries in the world that allow political parties or candidates to receive anonymous donations.[41]

One safeguard against populism is India's long tradition of judicial independence, reinforced by a Supreme Court decision to create a collegium system that virtually removed the executive branch from the selection of judges. However, the BJP government's Chief Justice appointee, Dipak Misra, has proved to be a deeply partisan figure. In an unprecedented development in India's judicial history, four senior justices of the Supreme Court held a press conference in January 2018, in which they criticized Misra for selectively assigning cases to judges from whom they would receive a sympathetic, that is, pro-BJP, hearing. The four justices were particularly concerned about one case: the mysterious death of Judge B.H. Loya, who was overseeing a case involving murder allegations against Amit Shah, BJP president and member of the upper house of parliament. Rather than assigning this important investigation to one of the Supreme Court's senior judges, Misra assigned it to a relatively junior member of the bench. In a strongly worded statement, the justices expressed their concern that the erosion of the autonomy and integrity of the Supreme Court was jeopardizing Indian democracy.

The Suppression of Dissent

The NDA government has used legal, institutional, and bureaucratic means to curtail the activities of progressive NGOs and has heightened scrutiny and punishment of critical writers, scholars, and activists. The Central Bureau of Investigation raided the homes and offices of the co-founders of the respected, indepen-

dent television news channel, NDTV, which has often criticized Modi's views, on the spurious charges that they had not repaid bank loans. The Home Ministry has revoked the licenses of around 10,000 NGOs on the pretext that they have violated the provisions of the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA).

Under Indian law, NGOs that seek foreign donations must register under the FCRA, which prohibits the use of overseas funds for "activities detrimental to the national interest." This law long predates the current regime. Whereas the BJP and Congress party have freely accepted foreign funding, they have harassed progressive NGOs that are critical of government policy. Among the NGOs that the current government has targeted is the Lawyers Collective, an advocacy group in New Delhi which has provided free legal assistance to marginalized groups for three decades.

The Modi government has repeatedly curbed dissent on grounds that it is "anti-national," a vague allegation that authorizes arrests under the provision of antiquated colonial laws outlawing sedition and criminal conspiracy. One of the most widely publicized and ominous uses of the anti-sedition law occurred on February 9, 2016, at prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, involving a student-organized public meeting of poets, writers, and activists to oppose state repression in Kashmir. After a BJP-affiliated student organization, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)

alleged that the speeches were anti-national, the police raided the university and made several arrests, including student union president Kanhaiya Kumar. At Kumar's court appearance, government lawyers attacked and threatened him, his supporters, and journalists for their coverage of the issue; the government subsequently engaged in reprisals against several JNU faculty who had criticized its actions. Although the police admitted that they had no evidence against Kumar and the court released him on bail, the Modi government was silent and did not condemn the arrests.

ABVP attacks on critics of government policy, whom the ABVP alleged were seditious, continued. Most notable among was when Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student at Hyderabad University, committed suicide in January 2016 after he was harassed by ABVP activists. Following this, the ABVP attacked an Amnesty International meeting in Karnataka in August 2016 and disrupted talks by government critics in Jodhpur and Delhi in February 2017. The police did nothing to stop the attacks at Delhi University and did not file charges against any of the assailants.[42]

Anti-Minority Violence

There have been numerous incidents of Hindus lynching and killing people on allegations (often erroneous) that they were consuming beef or transporting cattle for eventual slaughter. Narendra Modi is indirectly responsible for beef ban-related violence. During the 2014 national election campaign, he attacked

the Congress Party for introducing a "pink revolution" that resulted from increased cow slaughter. He delivered fiery speeches on the subject during the 2015 state election campaign in Bihar. The first case that achieved widespread public attention was on September 28, 2015. In what came to be known as the Dadri lynching, a group of men, enraged by a rumor that a Muslim, Mohammad Akhlaq, had slaughtered a cow and consumed beef, stormed his home in Delhi, murdered him, and wounded his son. Modi waited 8 days before addressing the violence against Akhlaq, and then issued a statement exonerating the government and criticizing the opposition. He neither visited the family of the deceased nor condemned the comments of his political allies, who justified the lynching. Modi's statement did nothing to stop a wave of attacks on Muslims who were falsely accused of consuming beef or killing cows.[43]

Dalits have also been the targets of violence, partly because they consume beef and earn their livelihoods from skinning dead cows and buffaloes and selling their hides to leather traders. After a video that went viral showed a group of Hindu men brutally beating several Dalit youth who were skinning a cow carcass in Una Gujarat in July 2016, Modi criticized the actions of cow vigilante groups. (The assailants were not deterred by Dalits' claim that the cow was already dead.)[44] However, Modi ignored the close ties between what he termed "anti-social" vigilante groups and BJP state governments. Furthermore, days after his speech, the Haryana government created a po-

lice task force to detect cow smugglers and licensed vigilante cow protection groups to assist the police.[45]

Beef ban-related violence is both a cause and consequence of the weakening of political institutions. Elsewhere I have described this as sub-rosa violence: that is regular, small-scale episodes of violence that occur with some frequency.[46] Such incidents do not attract the attention of authorities because they generally do not result in a dramatic breakdown of law and order. It is hard to take preventive measures because such violence could occur at any time and place. Perhaps most disturbingly, over time such violence becomes routinized and those who enact it gain confidence that they can do so with impunity.

BJP state governments have directly contributed to beef ban-related violence by sponsoring punitive measures outlawing cow slaughter and beef consumption. Since 2015, BJP-led state governments in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, and Chhattisgarh have increased the penalties and jail terms for beef possession and cow slaughter.[47] The BJP promised in the campaign for the 2017 Legislative Assembly elections in UP to close illegal slaughterhouses and restrict mechanized ones. Modi's choice of chief minister for UP was Yogi Adityanath, an anti-Muslim ideologue who faces multiple legal charges for attempted murder, criminal intimidation, unlawful assembly, trespassing on burial places, and endangering the life or personal safety of others. He was imprisoned for 11 days in 2007 for inciting vi-

olence in Gorakhpur. Upon being sworn in as Chief Minister of UP, Adityanath announced a zero-tolerance policy on matters related to cow smuggling and slaughter. The police and bureaucracy not only shut down illegal and mechanized slaughterhouses but many legal ones. His orders unleashed extensive violence against shops selling meat.

The national government has given state governments tacit approval for these far-reaching measures. In May 2017, the Ministry of Environment imposed a ban on the sale of cows and buffaloes for slaughter at animal markets across India. The following month, the national government issued new regulations requiring any person selling livestock to produce a written guarantee that it would not be slaughtered. These regulations effectively ban the sale of buffaloes as well as cows for slaughter.

Conclusion

To many observers, including both critics and detractors, Narendra Modi is the driving force behind the major political changes that are taking place in India today. Think back to Indira Gandhi at the height of her powers and recall the slogan one of her sycophants popularized, "Indira is India." Could we substitute Indira with Narendra? Is Modi India?

Clearly Modi's popularity exceeds those of most Indian prime ministers. Even 2 years into attaining power, 81% of Indians had a favorable view of Modi, including 57% who held very favorable views. Eighty percent have a favorable view of the BJP. These positive views of Modi and the BJP transcend gender, age, educational background, income level, and rural–urban divides. (They clearly do not reflect the sentiments of minorities.) Eight-in-ten people thought the economy was doing well and 62% approved of Modi's efforts to help the poor and address unemployment. Aspirations for India to achieve greater global recognition and fears of terrorism, both of which Modi has promoted, also help explain his popularity. A majority of those surveyed (62%) believed that using overwhelming military force is the best way to defeat terrorism and 63% support increased defense spending. A growing number of Indians, roughly two-thirds (65%), are satisfied with the way things are going in their country. Such satisfaction was up 9 percentage points since 2015 and 29 points since 2014, before the BJP came to power.[48]

Modi's personal popularity is undeniable. However, Modi is the product of a populist tradition. The RSS, India's most important populist organization, birthed Modi. Indeed, Modi is more indebted to the RSS and more a product of its training than any other senior BJP leader today. From the RSS, Modi learned what it meant to champion the common person, rail against elites, disparage representative institutions, and tether religion and nationalism. The steadfast support of the RSS enabled Modi to become chief minister of Gujarat and helped him become prime minister of India. If Modi benefitted enormously from RSS support, he also enabled it to grow and flourish.

Modi thus acquired leadership over the Hindu nationalist party (the BJP), civil society association (the RSS), and social movement organization (the VHP). Such synergy between party, movement, and governing leadership is what most populists aspire to achieve.

The electoral success of the BJP and Modi in 2014 was also a response to a quiet crisis of Indian democracy. It was characterized by a loss of faith in the first generation of political leaders who created representative institutions and a multiparty system. The people who voted for the BJP in 2014 were angered at having to pay bribes for basic goods and services, while major public officials were getting away with serious public corruption. They were angered that the Congress party was so determined to maintain its family's monopoly on power that it discouraged alternative leadership. They were frustrated by a lack of new jobs, India's crumbling infrastructure, and inadequate electricity supplies. It must also be said that Modi and the BJP highlighted these problems and contributed to the aura of crisis. Furthermore, Modi changed the discourse on elites. Given his own backing by powerful business houses, his expensive media savvy campaign and his commitment to hastening economic reform, Modi could not speak of elites in class terms. Instead, he described them in populist fashion as corrupt, self-interested politicians and flawed representative institutions.

It would be misleading to imply that opposition to the BJP's populist policies has been absent. Civil society groups have opposed the climate of intolerance. Writers have returned their literary awards. Scientists have opposed government inaction in face of religious bigotry. Students and faculty have protested ABVP attacks on academic institutions. Dalits have protested atrocities against the community by demonstrating on the streets and running for political office. Thousands of people bearing placards saying, "Not in My Name," have protested anti-Muslim violence in several Indian cities. High courts have struck down BJP state government policies to withdraw slaughter house licenses in UP and restrict the transportation of cattle in Maharashtra. The Supreme Court has challenged Modi's contention that security and anti-corruption concerns outweigh privacy and affirmed that citizens have a fundamental right to privacy. Four senior Supreme Court justices took the audacious step of speaking out against the biases of the government-appointed Chief Justice. And yet, opposition to Modi and the BJP is fragmented and episodic and has yet to undermine populists' discursive power.

Rather than challenging deeply cherished democratic ideals, Modi has led the opposition to established elites in the name of returning power to the people. His ability to provide easy answers to popular grievances reflects the long term of failure of Indian democracy to adequately address poverty, inequality, and minority rights. If Indian populism is inconceivable in Modi's absence, Modi's popularity reflects the increased illiberalism of Indian democracy.

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