

Modi's Nationalist-Populism and Indian Democracy – A Study

Medichelmila Kanakalaxmi

Lecturer in Political Science DL, Government Degree College, Mancherla, Telangana.

Introduction

Indian politics have experienced a significant shift in terms of leadership style, ideological orientation, and modes of government since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014. With Modi's ascent, coalition-driven, consensus-based politics gave way to a more centralized, individualized style of leadership. His unique blend of aggressive nationalism and populist rhetoric—often referred to as nationalist-populism—is the foundation of his political popularity. By altering the parameters of democratic engagement in India and portraying Modi as a direct representation of "the people," this strategy has changed electoral competition, governance procedures, and political rhetoric.

According to Modi, nationalist-populism combines a strong nationalist ideology based on cultural identity and civilizational pride with mass-oriented populist appeals. In this setting, nationalism offers a uniting narrative focused on sovereignty, national unity, and cultural restoration, whereas populism portrays politics as a moral fight between the good people and a corrupt or ineffective elite. This dual framework is often used by Modi's leadership, portraying himself as a resolute leader who upholds the goals of common people and defends the country against both internal and external threats. Modi has developed a direct emotional connection with voters through large-scale rallies, social media outreach, and symbolic policy measures, frequently eschewing conventional institutional middlemen like party organizations, the media, and deliberative forums.

Examine the effects of Modi's nationalist-populism on Indian democracy. Modi's leadership has, on the one hand, increased political involvement and mobilization, especially among those who felt left out of elite-driven politics in the past. The perception of a responsive and action-oriented state has been strengthened by welfare-oriented policies that are presented as efficient and pro-poor. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) electoral victories further demonstrate how successful nationalist-populism is as a political consolidation tactic.

However, there are serious worries about the state of Indian democracy due to the emergence of nationalist-populism. Democratic checks and balances have been stretched by the executive branch's concentration of power, the growing personalization of authority, and the marginalization of alternative voices. While nationalist conceptions of identity could jeopardize India's constitutional commitment to pluralism and minority rights, populist narratives that link dissent with disloyalty run the risk of restricting the room for critical discussion. There are concerns regarding institutional autonomy and accountability since democratic institutions including the media, judiciary, and civil society are more subject to political pressure.

In India, nationalist-populism and democracy interact to produce a complicated and contradictory result. The substantive quality of democracy, which is characterized by inclusivity,

institutional independence, and the protection of rights, is facing new difficulties even while democratic processes like elections are still strong and politically significant. Modi's nationalist-populism modifies democracy by elevating executive power and majoritarian legitimacy above liberal-democratic standards, rather than completely rejecting it.

A significant shift in modern Indian politics is Modi's nationalist-populism. Tendencies that limit diversity and institutional balance coexist with its capacity to generate public support and project national confidence. To evaluate how Indian democracy is changing in the Modi era, it is crucial to comprehend these two effects.

Modi's Leadership and the Rise of Nationalist-Populism

The emergence of nationalist-populism in India has been largely attributed to Narendra Modi's leadership, which has altered both political style and intellectual orientation. High levels of personalization of power, charismatic authority, and a well-developed image of strength and decisiveness define his leadership style. Modi has established himself as the principal center of political authority, in contrast to previous prime ministers who functioned within collective leadership frameworks and mostly depended on institutional procedures. His claim to represent the true will of the people has been strengthened by this personalization, which has allowed him to build a direct and emotionally resonant contact with the electorate.

Modi's smart use of mass media is a crucial aspect of his leadership. Modi avoids conventional middlemen like political parties, bureaucratic elites, and mainstream media through massive rallies, radio shows like Mann Ki Baat, and a strong social media presence. A fundamental tenet of populism is shown in this direct communication method, in which the leader addresses the populace directly and portrays governance as a conversation between the ruler and the ruled. By doing this, Modi establishes control at the center and presents himself as approachable and responsive. In his discourse, the "new" politics he stands for are often contrasted with the shortcomings of past administrations, which are portrayed as dynastic, corrupt, and unconnected to the goals of the populace.

Modi's portrayal of himself as an outsider to elite political culture adds to his popular appeal. He creates a story of authenticity and personal hardship by highlighting his modest upbringing and ascent from lowly beginnings. Voters who view conventional political elites as entitled and self-serving find great resonance in this narrative. In this way, populism turns into a moral framework that justifies strong leadership as required to overcome institutional stagnation and national decline in addition to being a tactic for electoral mobilization.

The ideology of Hindutva, which places a strong emphasis on cultural unity, civilizational continuity, and the importance of a Hindu national identity, is intimately linked to nationalism under Modi. This type of nationalism encompasses cultural and historical narratives that characterize India as a basically Hindu culture, going beyond geographical sovereignty. According to this concept, social discipline, political assertiveness both at home and abroad, and cultural renewal are all considered components of national power. Thus, Hindutva offers a coherent image of who "the people" are and what the country stands for, providing the ideological basis for Modi's populist claims.

The creation of a cohesive political community, frequently characterized in opposition to perceived internal and external threats, is made possible by the combination of nationalism and populism. While foreign dangers are used to defend strong leadership and centralized power, internal critics, political rivals, and minority groups may be depicted as barriers to

national unity. This dynamic upholds a majoritarian interpretation of democracy in which pluralistic principles and constitutional protections are subordinated to the will of the majority.

Modi's leadership is a prime example of how nationalist-populism functions by combining direct communication, charismatic authority, and ideological nationalism. Although this approach has been successful in gaining widespread support and redefining political participation, it also poses significant concerns on how to strike a balance between democratic inclusivity and strong leadership. The emergence of nationalist-populism under Modi emphasizes how leadership in modern Indian democracy is both transformative and contentious.

BJP's Populist Policies and Nationalist Agenda

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, has pursued a policy agenda that deliberately blends an assertive nationalist vision with welfare-oriented populism. Since 2014, the party's electoral success and ideological cohesion have been largely attributed to this twin strategy. The BJP has improved its reputation as a pro-people and pro-nation political force by combining tangible advantages for sizable segments of the populace with potent nationalist symbols.

One of the main tenets of the BJP's governance approach has been welfare populism. Initiatives that directly empower the impoverished and disenfranchised include the Public Distribution System reforms for food security, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (housing), the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (sanitation), and direct benefit transfers (DBT). The populist assertion that the government provides benefits directly to "the people" without corruption or elite capture is strengthened by these policies, which place an emphasis on efficiency, transparency, and avoiding middlemen. The perception of Modi as a kind and resolute leader who personally assures the wellbeing of residents is further strengthened by the personalization of these programs, which are frequently branded with the prime minister's name and heavily publicized. Additionally, this welfare goal has symbolic meaning. Beyond their practical benefits, these programs transmit dignity, inclusion, and acknowledgment, particularly to historically neglected communities. The BJP presents welfare as empowerment within a strong nation rather than as a state charity by showcasing beneficiaries' tales and connecting policy success to pride and self-reliance. This story is quite similar to populist politics, in which direct interaction with common people and visible action are the sources of legitimacy for leaders.

The BJP has pushed a strong nationalist agenda that aims to reinterpret what it means to be an Indian country in addition to welfare populism. Significant policy choices like the repeal of Article 370, which eliminated Jammu and Kashmir's unique status, are presented as acts of national sovereignty and unity. In a similar vein, nationalist arguments are used to defend the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which is presented as a corrective action based on national security and civilizational responsibility. These initiatives, which demonstrate political will and ideological clarity, strike a deep chord with the BJP's core constituency.

The establishing of religious landmarks, the celebration of Hindu cultural heritage, and the rewriting of national history are examples of symbolic and institutional tactics that have also been used to advance cultural nationalism. Such programs, which mainly rely on Hindutva ideology, support the idea of India as a culturally cohesive nation. According to this theory, national loyalty and cultural conformity are intimately related, resulting in a moral divide between those who are viewed as truly belonging to the country and those who are on its periphery.

However, there are serious issues with inclusivity and minority rights as a result of this combination of nationalist policies and populist benefits. Critics contend that majoritarian language and actions like the CAA run the risk of eroding India's constitutional commitment to equality and secularism. Particularly among religious and ethnic minorities, the focus on cultural nationalism may reduce the room for pluralism, dissent, and alternative identities.

The BJP's populist policies and nationalist agenda operate in tandem to consolidate political support and reshape democratic discourse. While welfare initiatives enhance the government's mass appeal and legitimacy, nationalist policies redefine the boundaries of political belonging. Together, they illustrate how populism and nationalism function as mutually reinforcing strategies in contemporary Indian politics, with profound implications for democracy and social cohesion.

Majoritarianism and Democratic Backsliding

The rise of majoritarianism in Indian democracy is a major issue linked to Modi's nationalist-populism. A political logic known as majoritarianism treats the identity, values, and preferences of the numerical majority as equivalent to the nation's will. In this perspective, constitutional values like pluralism, institutional discipline, and minority protection are subjugated to election triumphs as the primary source of democratic legitimacy. This change has redefined democratic equality under Modi's leadership in ways that run the risk of becoming exclusive rather than inclusive.

By creating a culturally cohesive "people," frequently characterized by religious or civilizational identity, nationalist-populism promotes majoritarianism. In the Indian context, this has resulted in Hindu cultural narratives and symbols being given more weight as markers of national identity. The political community itself is reinterpreted in more limited terms, even though elections are still contested and participation rates are high. Even though they still have formal rights, citizens who defy prevailing cultural norms—especially members of religious minorities—may face symbolic or political marginalization. As a result, cultural affiliation rather than constitutional citizenship becomes a prerequisite for democratic equality.

Importantly, this transformation does not entail the abandonment of democratic procedures. India continues to hold regular elections, maintain multiparty competition, and observe constitutional forms. However, the substantive content of democracy—defined by civil liberties, minority rights, and institutional autonomy—faces erosion. This phenomenon is often described as democratic backsliding, where democratic institutions and norms weaken gradually from within rather than collapsing outright. Modi's nationalist-populism exemplifies this pattern by maintaining electoral legitimacy while reshaping the normative foundations of democracy.

The legitimacy of this change is largely dependent on electoral success. Strong executive action is justified by repeated electoral victories, and dissent is written off as elitist or anti-national. Populist discourse undermines the democratic role of independent institutions, opposition, and dissent by portraying them as impediments to the public will. There is growing pressure on institutions like the media, civil society organizations, and even the court since their independence is seen as incompatible with strong national unity and decisive rule.

Thus, the Indian example shows that democratic regression can happen without overt authoritarian disruption. Nationalist-populism reinterprets democracy as majoritarian rule instead of suspending elections or dismantling institutions. Efficiency, cohesion, and strong leadership are valued more highly in this understanding than consideration, responsibility, and

the defense of human rights. As a result, it becomes harder to distinguish between democratic administration and illiberal behavior.

The rise of majoritarianism under Modi's nationalist-populism highlights a critical tension within contemporary Indian democracy. While democratic procedures remain intact, their liberal and pluralistic substance is under strain. Understanding this distinction is essential to assessing the long-term implications of nationalist-populism for democratic resilience in India.

Conclusion

Modi's nationalist-populism has become a revolutionary force in Indian politics, changing the way that authority is used, how people view their leaders, and how policies are developed and carried out. This political strategy has been successful in mobilizing sizable portions of the public by fusing populist appeals to "the people" with powerful nationalist myths. It has increased political engagement, strengthened a feeling of patriotism, and presented a picture of strong and capable leadership. By doing this, it has changed the expectations for leadership in India, moving away from institutional negotiation and consensus-building and toward centralized power and charismatic command.

However, Modi's nationalist-populism has very conflicting democratic consequences. The liberal underpinnings of Indian democracy are severely strained, even though it functions within nominal democratic frameworks like elections and parliamentary government. As nationalist narratives increasingly favor cultural uniformity over diversity, pluralism—which has historically been a distinguishing characteristic of India's political system—faces mounting difficulties. Despite being protected by the constitution, minority protections run the risk of being undermined when national identity is presented in a majoritarian manner. As a result, allegiance to the country is implicitly associated with adhering to prevailing cultural standards, leading to a restriction of political belonging.

In this scenario, pressure has also been placed on institutional independence. Strong executive control and the delegitimization of opposition are frequently justified by populist legitimacy acquired from successive political victories. It is possible to present independent institutions like the media, civil society organizations, and monitoring agencies as impediments to the national interest or popular will. This dynamic eventually changes how democracy operates in reality by shifting the balance between executive authority and democratic accountability.

The history of India shows that nationalist-populism does not always completely destroy democratic institutions. Rather, it quietly redefines their meaning and purpose while coexisting with them. Elections are still a source of legitimacy, but liberal democratic values like institutional checks and balances, pluralistic discourse, and rights protection are becoming less important to governance. Evaluating the future course of Indian democracy and determining whether it can uphold its constitutional norms in the face of the growth of nationalist-populism requires an understanding of this conflict between democratic form and democratic content.

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