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The Emergence of Right-Wing Populism in India[1]

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The rise of Narendra Modi to power in Delhi and his mode of politics since then have inaugurated a new phase in national politics. This phase is best conceptualized as right-wing populism, a term often used in Europe and the United States for some political tendencies that have repeatedly appeared. In the past, at the national level, especially during Indira Gandhi's years, India witnessed left-wing populism, a term normally associated in the comparative literature with Latin American politics. But right-wing populism, more characteristic of the US and Europe, was at best a phenomenon in some Indian states.[2] With Modi's ascendancy in Delhi and the concomitant rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in more states than ever, the scope of right-wing populism has become national. It is too early to tell whether the results of the state assembly elections in December 2018, in which the BJP lost three important states to the Congress party, will seriously alter Modi's political discourse.

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[2] The Shiv Sena is perhaps the first state-level example of right-wing populism. Modi in Gujarat is also a typical instance.

I start below with a conceptual exercise. I ask how populism is defined, reviewing a burgeoning body of scholarship. I then briefly look at one of the several forms of populism in India[3]—the left-wing populism—before finally concentrating on Modi's politics and explain why some of its key features are at their core right-wing populist.

Populism and Its Variants

'Two regions,' say the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, the first handbook of its kind ever, 'have particularly been affected by the growth of populism since the early 1990s: South America and Europe.'[4] They also tell us that 'between 1990 and 2010 approximately twelve hundred books on populism were published in English',[5] a trend that they think is unlikely to subside, given recent developments in democracies from the US to post-Soviet states and Asia, including India.

But the puzzling thing is that the scholarship is still in a relatively early phase of conceptual development. The 'empirics' have run ahead of the conceptualization. That may be partly because of the nature of the phenomenon. It is 'a notoriously difficult concept to define', says Muller.[6] 'Inherently, populism is a shifty concept,' argues Weyland.[7]

Still, surveying the field, some common elements can be culled from the literature. Here is a summary of the key characteristics.

1. Populism is a set of ideas, a discourse, not simply a temper or style of politics. It is best defined as a 'thin-centered ideology',[8] which can go in various directions. It is not a full-blown ideology like liberalism, socialism or conservatism.[9]

2. Its basic roots lie in the idea of popular sovereignty. It heavily focuses on a contrast between the 'people' and the 'elite', and a certain moral charge is injected into this contrast. The people are simple, pure and virtuous, and the existing elite corrupt, vain and self-interested. Some leaders authentically represent 'the people' or 'the masses', while others are venal and moral crooks to be tamed by the state and mass hysteria.

3. Charismatic leaders, authentically representing the people, and their organizations—even if new and untested—are better than the established political parties. Alternatively, such charismatic leaders should take over the established parties, displacing the existing political elite.

4. Since popular wishes are best expressed in elections, democracy is overwhelmingly about elections. The customary non-elected

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[3] Three relatively recent writings speak of Indian populisms that go beyond the left–right distinction. Jayal argues that Arvind Kejriwal's politics are populist, but Modi's politics are marked by a 'realist Caesarism', not populism. Jaffrelot and Tillin analyse Modi and Indira Gandhi as populists, but also include two other varieties: agrarian populism a la Charan Singh and cultural-regionalist populism a la Tamil Nadu's Dravidian politics and Andhra's NTR years. Basu adds JP's 1970s movement to Indira Gandhi and Modi, calling them all populists. My conceptual discussion in the next section identifies populism as '*thin-centered* ideology' that can go in various directions, including in principle the ones these scholars have identified. If I concentrate on only two varieties—left and right—in this essay, it is primarily because they are the most pertinent to my focus on national politics. The other varieties may well cover state-level politics, but have not played a major role nationally yet. See Niraja Gopal Jayal, 2016, 'Contending Representative Claims in Indian Democracy', *India Review*, 15:2; Christophe Jaffrelot and Louis Tillin, 2017, 'Populism in India', in Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford University Press; and Amrita Basu, 2018, 'Narendra Modi and India's Populist Democracy', *Indian Politics and Policy*, 1:1.

[4] Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo and Ostiguy, 2017, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 7.

[5] Ibid., 10.

[6] Jan-Werner Muller, 2017, ibid., 590.

[7] Kurt Weyland, 2017, ibid., 48.

[8] Cas Mudde, 2004, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39 (3).

[9] Here is inter alia another definition: Populism as a term is 'primarily associated with particular emotions and moods' (Muller, 2016, *What is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1). One should also note that some scholars have called it simply a strategy, not a body of ideas (Weyland, 2001, 'Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin America', *Comparative Politics*, 34(1).

institutions of oversight—the judiciary, the press, the intelligence agencies, the civil society organizations, etc.—which normally constrain democratic governments between elections, must follow electoral verdicts. In other words, popular will expressed via elections should enjoy clear primacy over, and be unconstrained by, constitutions, laws of the land, or the roles and rules of non-elected institutions.

5. In light of popular will, laws, even constitutions, can and should be changed, if necessary. Within the governmental structure, executives and legislatures are superior to courts for the former express popular wishes; and within executives, the elected wings are primary, the unelected bureaucracies secondary.

6. Charismatic, authentic leaders should have a direct, unmediated relationship with the masses, the people. This relationship should not be interrupted by intermediate modes of communication—for example, the media, the press. Alternatively, the media should follow the wishes of those leaders who represent popular will.

7. The same argument is sometimes applied to party organizations. Though there are long-standing populist parties and they can develop relationships with the masses, charismatic leaders must exercise control or dominance over such parties. Ideally, the leaders and the people should be directly connected.

8. The idea that the people are sovereign generates an inevitable and important corollary. Who are 'the people'? Or, how are 'the people' to be 'constructed' in politics?[10] It is the answers given in response to this question that take populism in the left or right direction. If the working classes and the poor constitute 'the people', populism heads towards the left, and income redistribution and welfare-oriented policies follow. If the answer is that a religious, ethnic or racial majority constitutes 'the people', then populism of the right is born. The latter kind of politics is anti-pluralist, hostile to ethnic, religious and racial minorities, and inhospitable to those new migrants, who are different from the majority community. Populism of the right, thus, tends to acquire the form of majoritarianism,

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[10] 'Populism always claims to speak for "the people", but precisely who "the people" are is never clear (Duncan Kelly, 2017, 'Populism and the History of Popular Sovereignty', in Kaltwasser et al., 511).'

unconstrained by notions of minority rights. It has recently been called 'democracy without rights'.[11]

The geographical anchorage of these ideas is noteworthy. As already indicated, most of the literature on left-wing populism has come from Latin America, whereas European countries—France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Austria, Poland—dominate the scholarship on right-wing populism. This, of course, does not mean that Latin America has witnessed no right-wing populists. The populists of the early 1990s—Argentina's Menem, Peru's Fujimori, Brazil's Collor—have been categorized by Latin American specialists as right-wing populists, but after 2000, politics of Latin America—especially in countries like Bolivia and Venezuela—is said to have returned to its leftist populist grooves.[12]

In the US too, both right and left populisms have been historically present. Right-wing populism has always represented politics embracing anti-immigrant or anti-minority sentiments. Such politics appeared against the Irish in the 1850s, against the Chinese in the 1880s, against African Americans repeatedly. In its anti-Muslim and anti-Hispanic strains, Donald Trump's election campaign and victory have been the most recent examples of an older political current. Left-oriented populism in the US covers politics expressing popular anger against the coastal economic elites, especially bankers and Wall Street executives. It first rose in the form of agrarian populism of the 1880s and 1890s, when urbanization and industrialization took off in the US.[13] The Occupy Wall Street movement after 2008, inter alia, has been the latest instance of this kind of American populism.

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[11] Yascha Mounk, 2018, *The People vs Democracy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Ch. 1.

[12] Carlos de la Torre, 2017, 'Populism in Latin America', in Kaltwasser et al.

[13] Joseph Lowndes, 2017, 'Populism in the United States', in Kaltwasser et al. A significant characteristic of populism in the US, Lowndes adds, is that '*there are no durable populist parties as one finds in Europe, nor the possibility of populist majoritarian control of government as one finds in Latin America* . . . for the Constitution separates governance between three branches of government, . . . divides sovereignty between the national government and the states, and filters popular political expression into two great parties' (245).

How do these considerations apply to India? India's federal diversity perhaps means that at the state level, there could well be quite a few variants of populism.[14] My primary focus is on national-level politics, to which I now turn.

Populism in India

India first witnessed full-blown populism at the national level in the 1970s, when Indira Gandhi launched the *Garibi Hatao* (Banish Poverty) campaign. It was an instance of left-wing populism. Indira Gandhi gave political primacy to the poor in a way that Jawaharlal Nehru had not.

Nehru was committed to land reforms as a way of attacking mass poverty, but he pursued his ideological commitment in an institutional framework, which included non-elected institutions of oversight in a democracy—the Constitution, the courts, and an independent press. Indeed, to begin with, the courts struck down land reforms on grounds that they violated the right to property enshrined in the Constitution as a fundamental right. To preserve land reforms as a strategy, Nehru, instead of attacking the courts, followed the constitutionally assigned principle of overturning the courts via legislative super-majorities. Similarly, he also subjected his key economic programmes to party forums for approval, instead of overriding the party in search of ideological purity. He would sometimes be defeated in party forums— as, for example, when his proposal for collectivization of agriculture before the Second Five Year Plan was turned down.[15] Eradication of poverty was important, but so was commitment to, and preservation of, institutions.

In contrast, Indira Gandhi combined *Garibi Hatao* and electoral primacy, with attacks on the press and judiciary, and a demonization of political opponents, both within and outside the party. She wanted a compliant judiciary, an obedient bureaucracy, a malleable press, a docile party. The Congress party ceased to have internal organizational elections under her leadership, and she started the process of nominating party leaders. Arguing that she, and she alone, embodied the people's wishes, she went to the extent of suspending democracy, portraying the Emergency (1975–77) as a true expression of popular will. A typically populist slogan—'Indira is India'—was born and encouraged by her during her regime.

The idea of the leader's complete identification with the people, without institutional intermediation, is a common populist refrain, both on the left and right. Consider how some other famous left-wing populists have proposed the same logic. Saying he was the embodiment of the Venezuelan people, Hugo Chavez, after being elected to power in 1998, proclaimed: 'I demand absolute loyalty . . . I am not an individual, I am the people.'[16] And long before him, in 1946, Argentina's Juan Peron, the first widely noted left-wing populist of Latin America, would say: 'We have given the people the opportunity to choose, in the cleanest election in the history of Argentina, between us and our opponents. The people have elected us, so the problem is resolved. What we want is now done in the Republic of Argentina.'[17] There is no notion of institutional constraints after election victories in such pronouncements. Once elected, all institutions must bend to the wishes of the leader, for the leader, on this view, perfectly represents what the people want.

Since the days of Indira Gandhi, the term populism is always identified with the left in India. Economists, in particular, have used the term for pro-poor and pro-farm fiscal allocations or giveaways by the government, pointing to the norms of fiscal prudence that get violated in the process.

However, in comparative literature, as I have already stated, the term is also conventionally used for a certain mode of right-wing politics. The latter, culturally oriented, says that the majority community owns the nation, and minorities are dependents and supplicants, not carriers of rights. The religious, ethnic or racial majority constitutes 'the people', whose wishes are represented by those who win elections, and the non-elected institutions should not shackle the execution of these wishes by the government.

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[14] See note #2 above.

[15] Ashutosh Varshney, 1995, *Democracy, Development and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India*, Cambridge University Press, Ch. 3.

[16] Cited in la Torre, 2017, 202.

[17] Cited in la Torre, 2017, 198.

Based on the European experience, Mounk's description of the behaviour of populist governments over the last two decades is worth citing at length.

> In the early phases, the war on independent institutions frequently takes the form of inciting distrust, or even outright hatred, of the free press. . . . (M)ost populists take stringent measures against independent journalists and build up a network of loyalist media outlets that cheer their every move.
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> Attacks on the free press are but the first step. In the next steps, the war on independent institutions frequently targets foundations, trade unions, think tanks, religious associations and other   nongovernmental organizations. . . .
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> Populists realize how dangerous intermediary institutions with a real claim to representing the views and interests of large segments of society are to the fiction that they, and they alone, speak for the people. They therefore work hard to discredit such institutions as tools of old elites or outside interests. Where this does not suffice, they introduce laws limiting foreign funding to weaken them financially or use their control over the regulatory state to impede their operations.
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> But the greatest ire, and the most ruthless attacks, are usually reserved for state institutions that are not under the direct sway of the populist government. When public radio or television stations refuse to air government propaganda; when ethics watchdogs criticize the government; . . . ; when the highest court of the land deems the actions of the populists unconstitutional, these crucial institutions are first   tarnished with the brush of treason—and then 'reformed' or abolished.[18]

Thus, the greatest difference between left-wing and right-wing populisms is how 'the people' are defined. A deep distrust of the independent non-elected democratic institutions that check executive power is what they share in common.[19] For left-wing populists, the poor are 'the people', and for right-wing populists, it is the ethnic, racial or religious majority that constitutes 'the people'. That is why right-wing populism is both anti-elitist as well as anti-pluralist. Its hostility to minorities—the Roma in Hungary, the Jews in Poland, the Hispanics, Blacks and Muslims in the US, the Muslims in France, the Turks in Germany and Syrian refugees virtually all over Europe—is one of its defining features.

Since the arrival of Modi in Delhi, this latter kind of populism has come to mark India's national politics too. It is to the elaboration of this claim that the rest of this essay is devoted.

Modi's Right-wing Populism

In making the case that Modi's politics are populist, I will refer to the following sets of themes: his proud display of plebeian origins; his conception of 'the people' and his mode of communication with them; and his attitude towards the independent institutions of democratic oversight.

Humble Origins

Although humble origins are not a requirement for populist leadership—Trump and Berlusconi's privileged backgrounds are well known—such origins lend a certain added credibility to the populist claim that populist leaders authentically represent 'the people' and their adversaries, if privileged, are simply democratic imposters, incapable of understanding the feelings of the masses while immorally pretending to represent them. Hungary's Viktor Orban, a poster man of right-wing populism today, 'likes to brandish his plebeian origins and values: his family lived without running water, the children had to labor in fields during school holidays'.[20]

Modi has also repeatedly done something similar. At least three moments of the 'humble origins' narrative are especially worth noting. During the election campaign of 2014, Modi often presented himself as someone who sold tea at a train station in his childhood

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[18] Mounk, 2018, 44–45.

[19] When it comes to dealing with independent institutions, 'European populists, on both the left and the right, behave in very similar ways' (Mounk 2018:44).

[20] Jan-Werner Muller, 2018, 'Homo Orbanicus', *New York Review of Books*, 5 April, p. 61.

and contrasted those origins with the dynastic privileges of Rahul and Sonia Gandhi, his adversaries. When a Congress party leader, Mani Shankar Aiyar, dismissively referred to him as a *chaiwala* (tea seller), he turned the derision around and effectively attacked the elitism of his adversaries.

The next significant moment was on international corporate stage. On 27 September 2015, a little over a year after Modi's ascendancy to power, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, interviewed him at the Facebook Headquarters at San Jose, California. The interview was watched live by several million people and, subsequently, on YouTube by many more. Zuckerberg asked Modi a 'personal question', inquiring about his childhood and teenage. This is how Modi described his early years in Hindi:

> I used to sell tea at the train station. My father is no more. My mother is still alive, over ninety years old . . . . She is not educated. To make ends meet, she used to wash utensils in the neighbouring households, fill their water pots, and do a poor worker's manual work. You can't imagine how much she suffered when she was raising me. . . . Millions of mothers from *samanya parivar* (ordinary families) go through such suffering.[21]

A third important moment emerged during the election campaign in Gujarat in December 2017. Yet again, Mani Shankar Aiyar was involved. He called him a '*neech kism ka aadmi*' (a lowly person). Once Aiyar's remark became public, Modi used it in his campaign with enormous rhetorical force. Indeed, he did something strategically unexpected. Aiyar's remark was amenable to multiple interpretations: as a customary form of Brahminical condescension towards the 'lower castes' (Aiyar after all is a Brahmin name and Modi comes from a 'lower caste'); as tasteless St Stephens–Oxbridge arrogance towards the vernacular masses. Instead, Modi spun it as an expression of a Mughal mindset.[22] Modi also compared Rahul

Gandhi's ascension to his party's presidency with the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's inheritance of throne, ignoring that even Hindu princes rose to kingship by ancestry, not by election. In pre-modern times, lineage-based inheritance of power was not simply a Mughal practice; regardless of the ruler's religion, power was inter-generationally transferred within the family. That, however, did not matter. He conjoined a critique of Congress elitism with an anti-Mughal claim. In effect, then, Congress elitism was doubly preposterous: the top leaders were not from the people, and they followed the principles of Muslim rulers, who came from abroad. Earlier, Modi had called Rahul Gandhi a *shehzada* (Urdu for princeling) several times.

This kind of formulation is straight from the right-wing populist notebook. Populist rhetoric thrives on the binary between the hard-working and ordinary people versus the privileged and illegitimate elite, the samanya aadmi (ordinary man) vs the shehzada. Ram Madhav, a national general secretary of the BJP, summed up Modi's appeal in a typically populist way: 'The mob, humble people of the country, are behind Modi. . . . They are enjoying it.'[23]

Who are 'the People'?

Modi's conception of 'the people', or who the real Indians are, is worth dissecting at length. The Gujarat discussion above already says a lot about his view of 'the people'. If Modi had interpreted Aiyar's remark as a Brahmin's attack on a lower-caste person, it would have meant emphasizing the customary caste divisions of Hindu society. That is the narrative of the many lower-caste parties of India, both in the south and north. Calling lower-caste unity and caste-based social justice the principal objective of their politics, lower-caste parties, in search of power, seek to capitalize on the caste divisions of the Hindu community. In contrast, as a Hindu nationalist, Modi endeavours to unite them. Modi would rather lay stress on Hindu–Muslim cleavages than on internal caste divisions of Hindu society. If India as a nation is collectively 'owned' by its Hindu majority, then Hindu unity has to be viewed as a necessity, conceptually and as a political project.

[21] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v36Zj5NAIiA (translated from Hindi).

[22] Ashutosh Varshney, 2017, 'What Gujarat Means', *Indian Express*, 26 December.

[23] Ram Madhav, 2017, 'Coming Full Circle at 70', *Indian Express*, 15 August.

It follows that there are two sides to the Hindu nationalist construction of 'the people': external and internal. The former requires highlighting the differences between Hindus and Muslims, India's largest minority (and, secondarily, Hindu differences with the other minorities), and the latter calls for ignoring, or de-emphasizing, caste divisions within Hindu society. How have these two constitutive sides of Hindu nationalist construction of the people worked in Modi's politics?

As India's prime minister, who has taken a constitutional oath, Modi cannot easily openly say that India is a Hindu nation, and minorities, especially the Muslims, are secondary members of the republic. That would be an unconstitutional statement.[24] But in two ways, one stated, the other unstated, which inflect the ambient discourse, the view prevails.

Hindu nationalist themes did not dominate Modi's election campaign in 2014, which instead heavily emphasized governance and growth, and vigorously attacked the corrupt elites of Congress party and its dynastic leadership, but the anti-Muslim themes have repeatedly appeared in his speeches since then. Soon after coming to power, he often used the term 'barah sau saal ki ghulami' (twelve hundred years of slavery) in his speeches, both in India and abroad.[25] The reference was to a standard Hindu nationalist trope: that India's loss of independence began with the arrival of Muslim rulers in Sind in the eighth century, not with Britain's Bengal conquest in 1757. This trope ignores the historical truth that Muslims first arrived not as conquerors, but as traders in Kerala soon after the birth of Islam as a religion in the Middle East in the early decades of the seventh century. Islam in the Hindu nationalist narrative is a religion of India's conquest and an instrument of Hindu humiliation.[26]

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[24] Until and unless India's judiciary itself gives a Hindu nationalist interpretation of the Constitution.

[25] I analyse the first post-election speech that uses the trope of 'barah sau saal ki ghulami' in 'Modi's Ambivalence', Indian Express, 28 June 2014. Other speeches, including the widely noted one at Madison Square Garden on 29 September 2014, also used this trope (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ4jbh-SsHc)

[26] The two classic texts of Hindu nationalism that make this claim are: V.D. Savarkar, Hindutva, Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1989, originally published in 1923; and M.S. Golwalkar, We or Our

Roughly similar themes have also been present in his election campaigns for state assemblies after his parliamentary victory in May 2014. The Gujarat campaign, where he linked an admittedly elitist comment by a Congress party leader to 'the Mughal mindset', has already been mentioned. In Uttar Pradesh (UP), he critiqued the incumbent government run by a lower-caste party thus:

> If you create kabristaan (graveyard) in a village, then a shamshaan (cremation ground) should be created. If electricity is given uninterrupted in Ramzan, then it should be given in Diwali without a break. Bhedbhaav nahin hona chahiye (there should be no discrimination).[27]

Modi provided no evidence that the UP government had indulged in such conduct, but he nonetheless made a campaign speech, drawing a sharp distinction between Hindus and Muslims, the former unjustly ignored and the latter illegitimately favoured by the state government.

Perhaps the most revealing part of Modi's view of 'the people' has been his attitude towards vigilantism. Fifteen months after his rise to power, lynchings of beef eaters and cattle traders started coming to national attention. Muslims and Dalits were the targets of vigilante violence. Modi spoke vehemently against the lynchings of Dalits, but remained either silent on the lynching of Muslims, or his statements were perfunctory, compared to his vigorous critique of Dalit lynchings, or he blamed the governments of states where the lynchings took place, rarely denouncing the vigilante groups engaged in such violence.[28]

The larger comparative literature points to two categories of lynching. The first aims at restoring routine order via mob violence.

Nationhood Defined, Pune: Kale Prakshan, 1947, originally published in 1939. In their magisterial The RSS: A View to the Inside (Penguin Viking, 2018), Walter Andersen and Sridhar Damle discuss this theme in Golwalkar's work. My questions to Andersen about the historical veracity of these claims appear in 'A Battle between Hindutva and Hinduism Is Coming', Indian Express, 11 August 2018.

[27] As reported in Hindustan Times, 20 February 2017.

[28] I have discussed, is some detail, the Dalit–Muslim issues in India's vigilante violence in 'Return of the Cow', Indian Express, 23 August 2016.

Studies of lynching in Indonesia show that until recently, most of it was aimed at punishing theft, hit-and-run accidents, rape, adultery and witchcraft.[29] Instead of using the police, many Indonesians used mob violence as a disciplining mechanism. It had no ethnic or religious core.

The second category of lynching aims at enforcing a majoritarian ethnic/racial/religious political order. During 1880–1930, especially in the American South, white mobs lynched black Americans, if they crossed a certain historically embedded hierarchical boundary.[30]

Which of these two models is India's vigilante violence closer to? The biggest contentious issue, of late, is not anomic, ordinary criminality, built around traffic deaths, robbery and theft, which India has certainly witnessed. Recent lynchings in India against 'child lifters' also belong to the category of routine criminality. But the biggest new issues are beef eating and cattle trade, both explicitly connected to the Hindu nationalist project. Muslims are certainly not the only target of lynching; Dalits also are. But available statistics show not only a qualitative increase in the incidence of lynching after BJP's rise to power in 2014, but also that Muslims have been the primary victims.[31]

Modi's relative silence on some other vigilante projects is also striking. Soon after he came to power, Hindu nationalist organizations launched a *ghar waapsi* (home return) campaign, aiming at forcible reconversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism, on the grounds that they were originally Hindus and had been converted to Islam and Christianity by force in the past. The campaign has been dropped, but it is not clear it will not resurface. Another campaign, named *Love Jehad,* remains unrelinquished. It seeks an end to Muslim men marrying Hindu women, even if such marriages (or romantic relationships) are voluntary.

Modi not only maintained silence on the two campaigns, but he also appointed one of the most fervent proponents of these campaigns to a very important and powerful office of the country. In March 2017, Yogi Adityanath was made the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh upon the BJP's state-level election victory led by Modi.[32] The political symbolism of Adiyanath's appointment was unmistakable.

To summarize, even if Modi has not explicitly said so, India's Hindu community, the nation's religious majority, appears to constitute 'the people' for him. In effect, if not in law, the non-Hindu minorities thus become secondary citizens. Conceptually speaking, there is no surprise here: the notion of popular sovereignty has often militated against the idea of minority rights in many parts of the world.[33] While such rights remain legally protected, BJP's rise to national power resulted in an ecosystem, where Muslim marginality could potentially be pursued as a political project.[34]

[29] Bridget Welsh, 2010, 'Mobbing in Indonesia', in Ashutosh Varshney (ed.) *Collective Violence in Indonesia* (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner Press).

[30] Marilyn Howard, 2007, 'Lynching', *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots*. In her song, 'Strange Fruit', Billie Holliday immortalized the crushing pain of such violence. Its haunting opening verse was: 'Southern trees bear a strange fruit | Blood on the leaves and blood at the root | Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze | Strange fruit hanging from the poplar tree.'

[31] http://data.indiaspend.com/hate-crime. Also see, Rupa Subramanya, 'Has India Become "Lynchistan"', Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 1 July 2017 (https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/has-india-become-lynchistan/).

[32] Adityanath is the founder of Hindu Yuva Vahini, a vigilante organization. On the constitution and structure of the organization, see Abhimanyu Chandra, 'What the Hindu Yuva Vahini's Constitution Tells Us About Yogi Adityanath's Regime in UP', *Caravan*, 27 March 2017. See also an earlier report, Rohini Mohan, 'When I Ask Them to Rise and Protect Hindu Culture, They Obey Me', *Tehelka*, 14 February 2009. While Adityanath has not formally disbanded Hindu Yuva Vahini after becoming UP's chief minister, there are press reports that the RSS has objections to the continuance of the organization, at least in some parts of UP. See Dhirendra K. Jha, 'Is Adityanath's Hindu Yuva Vahini Being Dismantled to Appease the RSS?', Scroll, 8 March 2018.

[33] Duncan Kelly, 'Populism and the History of Popular Sovereignty', in Kaltwasser et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*.

[34] A remarkable example came from the 2017 assembly elections in UP, where Muslims are close to 20 per cent of the electorate. Among the 403 candidates for the UP assembly elections, the BJP did not select a single Muslim. I analyse the idea of Muslim marginality in 'The Yogi Gamble', *Indian Express*, 17 March 2017, and 'The Nitish

Modi and Independent Institutions

Let us finally turn to Modi's attitude towards institutions that are viewed as independent of the executive, or the government, in modern democracies. Two institutions, in particular, merit attention: the judiciary and the press. These are institutions of oversight; they oversee how the executive functions and seek to constrain it, if it crosses the accepted boundaries of law, constitutionality or ethics. As I have already argued, populists celebrate election victories and welcome concentrated executive power. They are deeply distrustful of constraints imposed by non-elected institutions on the execution of election-based political power.[35]

The most powerful institutional challenge to executive power typically comes from the judiciary, which is the final arbiter of constitutionality or legality in modern democracies. The rationale for the existence of the judiciary is not popular wishes, which can be highly prejudicial and can articulate deep-rooted biases. Lynchings of African Americans, after all, were popular in the post–Civil War American South, as was untouchability in India.

If popular wishes are against constitutional or legal principles and the executives (or the legislatures) express such wishes, then the judiciary, whose functioning is determined, in principle, by the ideals of the Constitution, is often the biggest institutional adversary of the idea of popular sovereignty. Until popular sovereignty leads to constitutional changes, the judiciary is not supposed to be governed by it. That is exactly why populists are deeply distrustful of courts. That is also why many populists either seek to change the Constitution after coming to power—or use executive power to appoint judges to create a pliant judiciary.

How does Modi's polity measure up to this populist standard? He has often said that the Constitution is the only sacred document of India, not the Gita, the Ramayana, or the Vedas. But, driven by an intellectual

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Echo', *Indian Express*, 3 August 2017. Also see Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Towards a Hindu State?' *Journal of Democracy*, July 2017.

[35] In part because of the attitude towards these independent institutions, Hindu nationalism, during its incarnation in national power during 1998–2004, did not acquire a populist character. As prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee was respectful of the judiciary.

agnosticism towards this claim, his government's relationship with the Supreme Court in particular, and the judiciary in general, has been an object of intense curiosity since his rise to power.

Normally trapped in confidentiality, the executive–judiciary tensions burst out in the open in January 2018, when some of the senior-most judges of the Supreme Court openly rebelled against the desire of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to placate the government. In March 2018, Justice Chelameswar's letter to the Chief Justice protesting government interference, became public. Here are the sections of the letter relevant to our discussion of the populist desire to tame the judiciary.

> Lord Bingham in his book, *The Rule of Law*, said that 'there are countries in the world where all judicial decisions find favour with the powers that be, but they are probably not places where any of us would wish to live'. . . .
>
> We, the judges of the Supreme Court of India, are being accused of ceding our independence and our institutional integrity to the executive's incremental encroachment. The executive is always impatient, and brooks no disobedience even of the judiciary if it can. Attempts were . . . made to treat the chief justices as the departmental heads in the secretariat. So much for our 'independence and preeminence' as a distinct state organ. . . .
>
> Let us . . . not forget that the bonhomie between the judiciary and the government in any state sounds the death knell to democracy. We both are mutual watchdogs, so to say, not mutual admirers, much less constitutional cohorts.[36]

A public expression of what is normally shrouded in secrecy has made it evident that India's executive under Modi seriously tried to tame the independence of the judiciary. Such attempts were brazenly made last by Indira Gandhi during the Emergency (1975–77). It may be that other governments also attempted to do this. However, in the absence of a public rebellion by the judges, it seems unlikely that the executive pressures were as intrusively great as they have of late been, or were in the 1975–77 period.

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[36] 'Chelameswar letter text', Scroll, 29 March 2018.

Modi's relationship with the press too betrays an intense distrust of journalists on one hand and a desire to control them on the other. As prime minister, Modi has rarely given press conferences, except on those occasions when he has met heads of government, when both parties are normally expected to brief the press on the negotiations. Such press conferences are typically fairly controlled for the kind of questions that are permitted. His press interviews are given typically to those journalists whose loyalty to him is not in doubt.

Modi uses social media and those traditional media outlets controlled by the government to communicate directly with the masses. His monthly radio address is called *Mann ki Baat* (Straight from the Heart), for which questions from the people are sought online. In this, he is no different from other populists in the world. Muller calls this style of communication 'an aesthetic production of proximity to the people' and summarizes other populists as follows:

> Victor Orban has himself interviewed on Hungarian radio every Friday; Chavez hosted the famous show *Alo Presidente,* in which ordinary citizens could phone in and tell the country's leader about their worries and concerns. . . . (Ecuador's President) Correa and Bolivian President Morales take part in their own similar TV programs.[37]

And the communication style of Turkey's President Erdogan, another widely observed populist, is no different.

> As President Trump has his tweets, the leader of Turkey has his speeches.
>
> President Recep Tayyip Erdogan makes up to three broadcasts every weekday—two a day on weekends—and his charismatic, combative talks are the primary vehicle of his success. . . .
>
> Even after 15 years at the helm, Mr. Erdogan, whose skills as an orator even his opponents envy, treats every event like a

campaign rally—and he turns just about every day into one. He remains the country's most popular politician and is poised to seek re-election, possibly this year, with polling showing him with over 40 percent support.

> Much of that appeal can be credited to his ubiquitous media presence and a speaking style that supporters find inspiring, and detractors divisive. Neither side doubts that it has struck a chord with Turkey's conservative working class.
>
> In that regard, Mr. Erdogan fits perfectly with the deepening global trend toward autocrats and swaggering strongmen (they are all men) who have found a way to speak forcefully for common people who feel their point of view has been ignored for too long.[38]

Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that with the rise of Modi, India experienced right-wing populism at the national level for the first time. During Indira Gandhi's reign, India witnessed left-wing populism. The principal difference between these two varieties of populism is that the former places the religious majority—the Hindus in India's case—at the heart of the polity and marginalizes the minorities in various ways, whereas the latter structures its rhetoric and policies around the poor. Both forms of populism privilege elections as the overwhelming source of popular will and, therefore, the only foundation of political power. To be sure, all democrats view elections as a source of power, but populists differ from liberal democrats in the extent to which they distrust, and seek to undermine, the non-elected institutions of constraint and oversight, such as the judiciary and press. Executive power, unconstrained by checks and balances, stands at the centre of the populist political vision. In trying to enact such a vision, Modi has turned out to be no different from so many populists currently ruling different polities in the world.

[37] Jan-Werner Muller, 2016, *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 43.

[38] Carlotta Gall, 2018, 'Sermons and Shouted Insults: How Erdogan Keeps Turkey Spellbound', *New York Times*, 2 April.