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Populism Plus

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The Narendra Modi triumph has been built on two projects: one, the representation of Modi as the unquestioned populist leader who could be trusted to defend the nation's security, and two, the long-term project of a nationalism defined by the Hindu majority.

Although it is not incorrect to explain the stunning electoral victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the success of populist politics, this overlooks the fact that the result was actually a combination of two quite different political projects.

One was the immediate projection of Narendra Modi as the popularly chosen sovereign, defending the nation against its enemies. This was a strictly electoral project. But the ground was prepared by a much more protracted cultural effort, carried out mainly in the Hindi language, to imaginatively construct the Indian nation-state as one that belongs exclusively to the Hindu majority. The populist electoral project may or may not succeed in future state and national elections. But the cultural project of Hindutva has laid the foundation for a permanent communal majority located in northern and western India. Pluralism is too weak an idea to challenge this majoritarian nationalism. The only contending vision that could become viable is a genuinely federal idea of the Indian nation in which each federating people can claim a position of equality. Hindu-Hindi majoritarianism can be fought through a sustained struggle for states' rights.

To make this argument, we could begin by comparing the elections of 2014 and 2019.

2014 and 2019 Compared

Are the Lok Sabha elections of 2019 a repeat of those of 2014? Yes and no. The similarities as well as the differences are instructive.

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The 2014 elections were also about Narendra Modi, but not quite in the way his image was projected this time. In 2014, Modi walked on to the national stage as a provincial leader; prominent no doubt, but controversial. Intended specifically to suppress toxic gossip about his nefarious role in the Gujarat riots of 2002, Modi's life story was told as the struggle of a man from a backward caste, born into poverty, and devoting his entire life to the cause of social service and the wellbeing of his people. But not in the old way. He was not a Gandhian renouncer who celebrated poverty and sacrifice. On the contrary, he was the architect of the Gujarat model of development in which privately owned high-technology industry was actively promoted as the leading sector whose growth effects, trickling down through ancillaries and service chains, could lift the living standards of the entire population. "Sab ka sath, sab ka vikas" (Together everybody; development of all) was his slogan.

In his 2014 campaign, Narendra Modi railed against the corrupt Congress system in which there was dynastic rule by a single family, excessive government interference in the economy, and the poor, the minorities and Dalits were kept in perpetual political bondage through doles. He promised wholesale reform of taxation and labour laws to make Indian industry globally competitive. There was no mention of Hindutva or the Ayodhya temple or the Uniform Civil Code. Even when other BJP leaders or candidates brought up the subject of Hindu nationalism, Modi carefully kept out of it.

Big business loved Narendra Modi. Never before had the captains of Indian industry, usually cautious in political matters and hedging their bets in financing parties and candidates, openly voiced such unqualified support for one side in a general election. The BJP's 2014 campaign was by far the most expensive ever in the history of Indian electioneering: the opposition came nowhere near the blitz and dazzle of Modi's campaign that used every form of visual, aural and print media to its utmost advantage. The result in 2014 was an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha -- the first time in 30 years for a single party -- for the BJP. The party's strength had always rested on its urban upper-caste and middle-class supporters in northern and western India (including its ally the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra). Now, driven by Modi's distinct appeal, it seemed to have cast its spell over wide swathes of people, both urban and rural, cutting across caste divisions and including, in particular, the younger generation which was aspiring to enter the glittering world of consumption.

The regional limits of the Modi-led mobilization of 2014 must not, however, be forgotten. The BJP and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) swept all the states of northern and western India, except for the Kashmir Valley, although they were only partially successful in Punjab. Outside that region, the BJP won some seats in Assam and Karnataka. But it had little impact on Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, West Bengal, Tripura and the other north-eastern states. Hence, it would not be wrong to conclude that the Modi wave of 2014 did not spill beyond northern and western India.

Between 2014 and 2019

One of the first steps of the Modi government on the economic front was to disband the Planning Commission. That seemed to indicate at least symbolically a desire to change the structural relations between the government and the economy. But neither global nor domestic conditions were favourable for bold initiatives to carry out institutional reforms to boost economic growth. Following upon the financial crisis of 2008-09, the American and European economies were in a slump and even the Chinese economy was slowing down. In India, foreign investment flows slowed down and manufacturing growth faltered. Employment generation in the formal sector was very limited. Even more ominously, the farming sector seemed to have entered a phase of chronic crisis. Whatever plans Modi's team may have had for legal and institutional reform on the economic front had to be shelved. The only project that went through was the implementation of the uniform country-wide Goods and Services Tax (GST), which had been in the works from Manmohan Singh's time. Even that required so much wheeling and dealing with the states and various business lobbies that it finally yielded a hugely cumbersome tax structure and, as of now, a fall in revenue.

A gimmick was tried. In November 2016, three months before assembly elections were due in Uttar Pradesh, Narendra Modi announced the demonetisation of Rs.500 and Rs.1000 bank notes. It caused massive economic dislocation and put most ordinary people in considerable inconvenience. But Modi was able to spin this economically senseless decision as one intended to unearth black money and punish the evil rich who supposedly hoard their ill-gotten wealth in high-value paper currency. Apparently, the gimmick worked because the BJP won a landslide victory in the UP elections of 2017. Two years later, it was clear that most demonetised notes had been legally returned to the Reserve Bank of India, and the decision had dealt a crippling blow to small-scale business, agriculture and the informal sector.

However, not every political challenge could be met this way. The discontent of farmers was particularly worrisome. The unrest was partly demonstrated by farmers' agitations in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan demanding better crop prices and waiver of agricultural loans. It was also tragically demonstrated by a virtual epidemic of farmer suicides. A different expression of the same problem was the series of agitations by dominant peasant castes such as the Jats, Gujjars and Patidars for reservations in government employment and higher education. Charges began to be made about the non-payment of massive amounts of bank loans by businessmen such as Vijay Mallya and Nirav Modi who had managed to flee the country. Did some industrialists such as the Ambanis and Adani get preferential treatment? Was this not crony capitalism?

Populism is a form of democratic politics in which an organisation or a leader is able to rhetorically connect the different unfulfilled demands of a variety of groups into a single chain of equivalence by claiming that they are all demands of the authentic people that are being denied by a powerful elite.

The year 2018 saw a series of defeats of the BJP in assembly elections and by-elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh – states considered to be the strongholds of the party. Even in Gujarat, it barely managed in 2017 to overcome a strong challenge from the Congress, while in Punjab its ally, the Akali Dal, was ousted from power by the Congress. The Modi government had to respond by resorting to the familiar tactics of populist social expenditure. Several schemes were launched for subsidized housing, medical insurance for the poor and in early 2019 pensions for the informal sector and cash payments to small and marginal farmers.

With economic reforms no longer on the agenda, the Hindutva wing of the BJP took matters into its own hands. Spurred by the inflammatory rhetoric of the saffron-clad *mahant* of the Gorakhpur *math* in his long-cherished role as chief minister of the largest state of India, a new campaign for cow protection was launched. The lead was taken by vigilante groups, apparently without any central coordination. They pounced upon individual Muslims, charging them with transporting or slaughtering cows, or possessing and consuming beef, and, in grisly scenes recorded and circulated on video, beat them to death. The Kannada journalist Gauri Lankesh was assassinated for propagating “anti-Hindu” views, allegedly by the same group that had earlier killed rationalist writers Narendra Dabholkar and M. M. Kalburgi. Further, the issue of building a Ram temple at Ayodhya was stirred up, with various petitions being

heard in the Supreme Court. That the focus of the BJP campaign would shift from *vikas* to *Hindutva* was signalled by the decision of the BJP not to field a single Muslim candidate in the UP elections of 2017. But the setbacks in late 2018 in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh raised serious doubts on whether the old anti-Muslim tactic would work this time.

On the eve of the general elections of 2019, therefore, the ground seemed to be ready for the opposition parties to take advantage of a widespread feeling of anti-incumbency in the BJP-dominated states of northern and western India. There was some enthusiasm among them to stitch together a credible alliance, as shown in a massive rally in Kolkata in January 2019. But when it came to seat sharing or working out a common programme, things fell apart. It is arguable that the Congress, dizzy with its successes in north India, began to dream of taking on the BJP all by itself. In any case, no national front was built among the opposition parties. Only in UP did the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Rashtriya Lok Dal produce a new electoral alliance.

Modi as the People's Sovereign

It is tempting to see the 2019 election as the triumph of right-wing populism – a trend seen across the world in recent times. But there are significant distinctions that must be drawn for a better understanding of populism.

The role of the leader in a populist organization is in personalising the idea of the people and their enemy. The leader not merely represents but in fact embodies the people; hence, the leader's enemies are by definition the people's enemies.

Populism has emerged as a distinct form of democratic politics in western countries in a situation where the welfare state has been dismantled, and mass political parties and mass trade unions no longer play a mediating role between government and society. Instead of universal health care or unemployment insurance or free education, specific government benefits are now distributed to small population groups, selected according to immediate political calculations. Hence, democracy produces a variety of demands by heterogeneous groups. The advantage for the rulers is that there is little scope for massive mobilization around a single demand. In India, there was never a welfare state that promised universal benefits to all citizens. Rather, democracy has expanded, especially since the 1970s, by enabling groups outside the urban middle classes to organize politically and make demands. Here too, the administrative technique has been to negotiate demands with specific population groups rather than to declare universal benefits. Since the 1970s, targeted benefits such as subsidised food, guaranteed work schemes, housing loans, free schooling or hospital facilities, pensions, etc. aimed at poor and marginal population groups have been distributed by every government, irrespective of party ideology. These are not distinctive features of populism in India.

But all demands made in a democracy can never be satisfied. Populism is a form of democratic politics in which an organisation or a leader is able to rhetorically connect the different unfulfilled demands of a variety of groups into a single chain of equivalence by claiming that they are all demands of the authentic people that are being denied by a powerful elite. An internal border is created between the people and their enemy. The ability to perform this rhetorical trick is an art. The successful populist movement or leader is able to do it, whereas many other attempts fail. Moreover, a populist movement may be effective only for a short while; as government responds or the demands change, the populist consolidation frequently unravels.

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The Indian states have a rich history of successful populist parties and leaders. M. G. Ramachandran's AIADMK in Tamil Nadu was a prime example, as was N. T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh or currently Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal. At the national level, there is only one such example: Indira Gandhi in the 1970s after she had split the Congress party, overwhelmed the old guard and won a decisive military victory against Pakistan. The role of the leader in a populist organization is in personalising the idea of the people and their enemy. The leader not merely represents but in fact embodies the people; hence, the leader's enemies are by definition the people's enemies. As long as a populist party is able to successfully maintain this role of the leader, it can adapt to changes in its support base. The leader is a sovereign chosen by the people who are prepared to give him or her absolute power to fight his or her enemies and deliver justice. What results is an authoritarian style of politics and centralization of power: no internal challenge to the leader is allowed, the opposition is subjected to repression and institutional norms are broken in the name of the popular good. However, the populist leader is not a dictator since the people's mandate must be periodically renewed by defeating the opposition in

elections.

The UP election of 2017 was probably when the decision was made by the BJP to go into the general elections of 2019 on the plank of militant Hindu nationalism. One aspect of this campaign was a hard line against agitators in Kashmir, rights activists and left-wing students on university campuses. The other was a focus on the threats posed by Islamic terror groups and the alleged role of Pakistan in sponsoring them. The old debate on pseudo-secularism was revived by the decision to pass legislation in Parliament to make the “triple talaq” a criminal offence. An amendment to the citizenship law was passed in the Lok Sabha to offer Indian citizenship to non-Muslim victims of religious oppression in neighbouring Muslim countries, which was an explicit recognition of a religious criterion of citizenship. A campaign was launched to complete the National Register of Citizens in Assam in order to identify illegal foreigners without valid documents.

Any attempt to question the BJP narrative was lambasted as treasonous. Modi was the embodiment of a nation under attack; his critics were by definition the nation’s enemies.

Modi’s image was now packaged as a strong leader who shared the global stage with the world’s great powers. Increasingly, the capabilities he could command as leader of the armed forces seemed to enter the picture prominently. The phrase “surgical strike”, hitherto used mainly in military circles in Israel and the US, became a household term in every Indian language, thanks to its repeated use by Modi in describing how he was dealing with the Pakistani threat. The terror attack in Pulwama in February 2019 and the retaliatory strike in Balakot provided the opportunity for the BJP to decisively shift the terms of the election campaign in Modi’s favour. The opposition was pushed onto the defensive. Any attempt to question the BJP narrative was lambasted as treasonous. Modi was the embodiment of a nation under attack; his critics were by definition the nation’s enemies. The rhetorical identification of the leader with the people and the leader’s opponents with the people’s enemies was complete.

Once the general elections to Parliament were successfully framed as essentially a question of the people choosing their prime minister, the opposition was stranded in a hopeless position. Even those voters who may have had reservations about the BJP’s candidates were forced to ask: “But if not Modi, who?” Considerations of economic grievances, caste loyalty, local pride, the merits of the candidate – everything paled into insignificance when the question became one of deciding who was the fittest person to lead the country. The opposition had no answer.

The Regional Limits

While the BJP victory this time seems even more decisive than in 2014, we must nevertheless notice the regional limits of the BJP’s success. While it has repeated its overwhelming victory in northern and western India, it has still not made headway in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, and only limited inroads into Telangana and Odisha. But it has dramatically broken into eastern India. This expansion began in 2018 with the BJP victories in Assam and Tripura. Even though there was much opposition in the north-east to the Citizenship Amendment Bill, the successful focusing of the election on the personality of the supreme leader meant that the BJP was able to hold on to its support base as well as its regional allies. In West Bengal, the BJP’s success has been phenomenal, signalling a possible change of regimes in the next elections to the state assembly.

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What do the regional limits signify? One must first ask what is common about the political space defined by the states of northern and western India. It is arguable that it is a space where the dominant language of democratic politics is Hindi. That has emerged as a language which is not restricted only to native speakers but includes all who have learnt to speak it. Every politician from Maharashtra or Gujarat speaks fluent Hindi – Narendra Modi and Amit Shah are by no means exceptional. This was not true a generation ago. More significantly, the circulation of mass cultural products in Hindi through cinema, television and social media has made it the political *lingua franca* of the entire region. In consequence, deeply entrenched narratives of Hindu resistance to Muslim oppression, which once had different regional inflections in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, have now merged into a common pool of historical memory that invigorates muscular Hindu nationalism. Alongside, there has been an unprecedented surge in the entire region of the active promotion of the Rama-Hanuman cult of militant physicality among young men.

What is particularly striking is how rapidly this mass culture of the Hindi region is spreading in eastern India. Bengal and the North-East are regions from which masses of young people go to the more prosperous states of India in search of work; these include white-collar professionals as well as labourers. The youth of this region are increasingly embracing the cultural world of Hindi in order to find a secure identity in majoritarian Hindu nationalism. Religious festivals around Rama and Hanuman, unknown in the region, have multiplied at an astonishing pace in the last few years. This is the social context in which the BJP political campaign about the threat represented by Muslim infiltration from Bangladesh has led to a clear polarization of the electorate in West Bengal and Assam along communal lines. The result was a repeat of the BJP success in Assam and Tripura, and the virtual elimination of the Left and the Congress in West Bengal.

What Next?

It would be a mistake to presume that issues of economic inequality, jobs, farmers' distress, caste conflict, and so on, have gone away forever. As politics returns to normality at state and local levels, those issues will reappear. Regional parties will again find their space in state politics. It is quite conceivable that as other issues return, the BJP dominance in UP or Gujarat or Maharashtra will be challenged. Thus, it is important to emphasise that the 2019 story was created by successfully tying together two separate political projects: one, the immediate representation of Narendra Modi as the unquestioned populist leader who could be trusted to defend the nation's security, and two, the long-term project of a nationalism defined by the Hindu majority. The two projects could be brought together because of the opportunity provided by the country-wide elections to parliament.

It follows, therefore, that regional issues and parties will continue to be significant at the state level, producing regional populist leaders as well as their challengers. The BJP has no natural monopoly at the state level anywhere in India. However, at the level of the country as a whole, the Hindutva project has successfully prepared the ground for a permanent communal majority based on the overwhelming size of the Hindi-dominated cultural zone. It would still require the crafting of a Modi-like populist icon to convert that cultural dominance into a parliamentary majority. But no juggling of opposition electoral alliances will ever effectively challenge the foundations of the Hindu-majoritarian cultural project.

Pluralism is too weak a response to Hindu-majority nationalism since it asks only for the minorities not to be excluded; it does not challenge the claim of the majority to dominate.

The only political response is a redefinition of the relation between the Indian nation-state and the peoples who constitute its sovereignty. Even though the Indian Constitution is formally federal, the unitary element was strong to begin with. In recent years, it has become even stronger. There used to be talk of greater federalism in the 1980s; that has largely vanished. States have become so utterly dependent on central assistance in fiscal matters that federal politics has been reduced to mendacity.

Pluralism is too weak a response to Hindu-majority nationalism since it asks only for the minorities not to be excluded; it does not challenge the claim of the majority to dominate. The only effective response is to claim greater equality of rights of every section of the people. Politically, the struggle could begin by claiming greater equality of states' rights in every major institution of government. M. K. Stalin seems to have fired the first salvo by declaring that the days of Hindi dominance must end. Surely, the question could be asked: why must politicians from other regions be expected to adopt Hindi as the natural language of Indian democracy when those from the Hindi region feel no compulsion to speak another Indian language? Equality is a powerful democratic value. It should inform the very constitution of the people within the Indian nation.