

Interpreting the Rise of ‘Populism’ And ‘Hyper-Nationalism’ in India: A Review of *India After Modi*

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For some time now, the world’s politico-economic order has been at an inflection point, witnessing a gradual, sustained rise in populism across nations. “Populism” is a word that has often been used historically in defining a set of social, political, economic movements that involve groups fighting against a pre-existing status-quo or establishment. The subsequent goals of such movements may need to be read (and understood) in the context of a nation’s socio-political climate around a period of time. For example, in the 19th century, a coalition of farmers, miners and workers in the US fought against the Gold Standard (an established international monetary system around the time) and the Northeastern banking and finance establishment. The post Great Depression world of 1930s saw countries in Latin America (seen with the longest tradition of populism) started undergoing waves of populist movements, epitomized by Peronism (Rodrik 2017). In recent decades too, especially in years after the Great Recession of 2008-09, this phenomenon is much evident in the modern world, with nations like the US, Spain, Italy, and Britain, seeing their own indigenous (populist) movements rise to political prominence.

Ajay Gudavarthy’s *India After Modi*, is an attempt to analyze the rise of *populism* in the socio-political context of India, since the emergence of Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party in 2014. The populist movement in India, according to Gadavarthy, signified by the rise of Bharatiya Janata Party’s *Hindutva-ism* under Narendra Modi, remains unique in its aim to spill new kind of “micro-foundations of power relations, techniques of momentary resistance,

and prolonged negotiation, imaginations of future change and nostalgia for past and continuity.” He argues that this unique form of political organisation has some distinctive features with “the ability to create a people, projecting a strongman, polarising between “us” and “them”, mobilising passions and emotions, bringing the private to the public, and replacing the institutional mode of pursuing politics with street mobilisations” (Gadavarthy 2019: xi).

In Modi’s New India, a conservative political being projects himself (herself) as a subaltern, but adheres to a politics of aspiration, which the ‘Indian Right’ (as articulated by BJP’s Hindutva-ism) has been able to rhetorically understand and tap-into for electoral gains. Anyone aware of the recent social and political events (the Union Territorializing of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the protest movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Registration of Citizenship -to cite but a few) may broadly agree with how Gadavarthy approaches the underlying reasons for how (and why) ‘fringe’ Hindutva politics gathered mainstream political space through electoral, legislative and rhetorical validation.

With over more than thirty short chapters, Gadavarthy’s book defines some of these aspects in greater detail along with various other socio-political happenings aiding the rise of BJP’s Hindutva brigade. One can draw this inference through the numerous illustrations brought out in the book. These include episodes discussing: suppression of free speech at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)- one of India’s apex universities, by branding students as “anti-national”; BJP’s action in the state of Jammu and Kashmir- the only Muslim majority state in India; the utilization and encouragement of mob violence to pursue the party’s ideological goals, and see its political entrenchment taking place for majoritarian gains. Through these references (amongst many others), Gadavarthy attempts to build an overarching theory of populism based on concrete actions taken by Narendra Modi and his ruling party in India. His analysis of some other (yet entwined) social issues, such as the state of Indian education and the discussion around the treatment of Dalits, form some of the most memorable parts of the book, attempting to coherently bridge the gap between *theory* and *praxis*.

However, in an effort to establish a broader theoretical canvas to India’s own version of Hindutva-ism or Indigenous Populism, there are a few deductive explanations that merit some critical reflection and further review. For one, there is little empirical support provided by the author to validate his observation on how ‘there is no Islamophobia in India’, or that Muslims have been vilified because they make for “safe enemies”. (Ibid 223). He argues that the violence against Muslims stems from “caste dynamics inherent in the Hindu society”. (Gadavarthy xvii) Yet, *othering* of Muslims among Hindu nationalists stretches no further back than the late 19th century (Jaffrelot 2007: 3).

Many prominent writers of the movement, such as V. D. Savarkar, were not even religious, let alone Hindu. Most were atheists and were motivated by their hatred of Muslims rather than their love for Hinduism. Those, like Savarkar

himself, chastised Hindus for being weak and effeminate (Ibid 2007: 85). The hatred for Muslims primarily germinated during colonisation around 1920, where it seemed apparent that the British would be the safest enemies of their nationalism. (Ibid 3). Nevertheless, it is still the Muslims that they targeted, a group Gadvarthy recognises comprises only 15% of the population, as opposed to the 80% Hindus of India. This, however, did not stem from a conception of them being “safe enemies”, but something that can only be a mixture of Islamophobia and insecurity that was bred by the same nationalists who railed against Muslims.

India’s many founding forefathers, such as Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore held that India was a united nation much before colonisation, and that Muslims and Hindus lived together relatively harmoniously since their arrival in Sindh around the 8th century AD (See Gandhi 1997, Tagore 1917). Their identities as regimented categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” is a modern phenomenon, and many Indian locals of the past, through generations of cultural assimilation, had indeed become ideologically ‘Hindu-Muslim’. Gudavarthy’s analysis on *othering* of Muslims, offers somewhat a myopic view based on events from 20th century instead of elucidating a more coherent narrative from a historical context that incorporates the dynamics of Hindu-Muslim rivalry across Indian history.

In another instance, there is limited explanation offered in the book to lucidly distinguish the nature of “populist movements” of the 21st century (including in India) from the nationalist movements emerging in Europe since the 19th century, starting from the French Revolution. A closer look at the history of hyper-nationalist movements across Europe provides detailed insights on how aspects of *othering*, the emergence of strongman complex, and others have shaped the rise of political movements there since 1790 and may not be a novelty of our generation. It is this that led Rogers Brubaker to remark that the French Revolution was truly revolutionary not in its liberal cosmopolitanism, but the xenophobic radicalism that created a sharp divide between French nationals and foreigners. This model of national citizenship showed the rest of the world “the image of its own future”, and this is indeed reflective of Modi’s India today (Brubaker 1992: 35, 46).

Further, a connection drawn between the current observable trends in Hindutva-based populism and its relation with India’s hyper-nationalistic emergence (or a majoritarian change in patriotic preferences) requires a deeper review. The overlap between “populism” and (hyper) “nationalism” that is contextually “unique” in India, as claimed by Gadavarthy, requires a more structural insight on how this is different from the marked nationalisms in Europe (say, during the 19th century). As Partha Chatterjee affirms, the overlap between populism and nationalism is one of the reasons why the former has not made “its entry into the hallowed portals of political theory” and is still regarded as fit only for the empirical discussions of sociology (Chatterjee 2011: 140).

As Antony Smith (2013) points out, there are **three** antinomies central to nations and nationalism. These are, according to Smith, “the ‘essence’ of the nation as opposed to its constructed quality; the antiquity of the nation versus its purely modern appearance; and the cultural basis of nationalism contrasted with its political aspirations and goals” (Smith 2013: 170). These antinomies effectively sum up the contradictions of BJP’s Hindutva-nationalism that Gudavarthy brings out as tenets to India’s version of *populism*.

As Gudavarthy points out, the Right is attempting to create a Hindu Rashtra from their mythological past by co-opting ethnic groups such as the Patidars, Marathas, Dalit-Bahujans, and even the Brahmins. This can represent the *first* antimony, wherein the construction of a modern Hindu nationalism remains fundamentally disconnected from its authentic past. Next, the Right is “pro-corporate but anti-modern”, forming the *second* antimony as it emphasizes on economic growth, yet relies on the science of the Vedas (Gadavarthy xviii).

Lastly, the BJP’s treatment of educational institutions points to the *third* antimony since it exposes the contradiction between its interests, which is ideologically influencing the minds of its students, while maintaining basic civil liberties, something it has failed to do so far.

These are only some examples of such antinomies playing out, even though Gudavarthy’s book is filled with many such illustrations. For example, the intensification of political differences between Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims in the Valley, as argued by Gudavarthy, relies on the same *othering* that creates polarities between “us” and “them”. Though, differences between these groups are more religious than political, the BJP has attempted to appropriate the Pandits to sustain this conflict. The vitriolic criticism of leaders like Nehru and Gandhi are also attempts by the BJP to distance itself from the past and present to form the basis for a new Indian nation.

India After Modi is therefore, an admirable effort in explaining some of the causal factors responsible for aiding India’s own indigenous populism under Modi’s Hindutva force, and the Prime Minister’s own status as the figurehead of the Right that has been successful in manipulating local narratives to suit their ideological and political agenda. The length of the book, comprising of 230 odd pages divided into more than 30 chapters, also stretches him thin in discussing the various aspects of BJP and Modi’s governance in power. The content of the chapters help further display how electoral gains are the driving force influencing decisions taken by BJP’s top leaders, and the ways in which the party influences ethnic identities to maintain their stranglehold on political power. In some ways, it is also a glimpse into the future as we see the same patterns recur in different forms. Recent events like the passing of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), discussions surrounding a country-wide implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and changes in National Population Register (NPR), emerge as evidences of the social engineering undertaken by the BJP to revitalize (and assert) their Hindutva-ism at the cost of constitutional values and safeguarding minority rights. The short length of the book chapters make some of these vital

aspects accessible to students of political science and contemporary affairs, offering the author a diverse readership.

Still, a few critical questions emerge from the book as focal points that merit a broader discussion:

- 1) How are the populist movements of the 21st century (including the rise of BJP's Hindutva-ism) and their underlying forces different from the movements seen in European nations around the 19th century? Does history help in asserting that “populism” and “hyper-nationalism” are phenomena that are complementary to each other?
- 2) In addition to highlighted socio-political reasons, what other factors in India, those emerging from economic reasons (rising income inequality, premature deindustrialization, higher unemployment, rural-urban divide, weakening labor class-to cite a few) can help explain the rise of ‘The Right’ in India?
- 3) And, how can a broader theory of “populism” distinctively explain the normalization of illiberal politics in democratic nations today?

A theoretical approach to understanding the rise of populism in different socio-economic and socio-political contexts opens up a number of new avenues to analyze this ‘liberal-illiberal’ dilemma with the changing face of modern democratic politics, that is unique (and yet bearing some similarities) to temporalities of nation’s histories of the past. Gudavarthy’s attempt to bring light to this, in *India After Modi*, is a step forward. The formulation of illustrated avenues into a more concrete theory though still remains an ongoing process of theorizing the *untheorized*. A deeper critical engagement with some of the above questions can be a start that enables us to move forward in doing so.

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