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Civilizationist Populism in South Asia:

Turning India Saffron

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century has witnessed a significant shift in how the concept of nationalism is understood. A political marriage between identity politics and populism has resulted in “civilizationism,” a new form of nationalism that entails an emotionally charged division of society into “the people” versus “the Other.” All too often, the divisive discourses and policies associated with civilizationalist populism produce intercommunal conflict and violence. This paper draws on a salient case study, India’s Hindutva movement, to analyze how mainstream populist political parties and grassroots organizations can leverage civilizationist populism in campaigns to mobilize political

constituencies. In surveying the various groups within the Hindutva movement and conducting a discourse analysis of their leaders’ statements, the paper shows the central role of sacralized nostalgia, history, and culture in Hindutva populist civilizationism. By analyzing the contours and socio-political implications of civilizationist populism through this case study, the paper contributes to the theoretical understanding of the concept more generally.

INTRODUCTION

During the 2014 electoral campaign in India, billboards adorned with a picture of Prime Minister Narendra Modi draped in hues of saffron color read, “I am a Patriot. I am Nationalist. I was born Hindu” (Ghosh, 2013). This narrative and imagery reflect the rise of the so-called “saffron tide” in India (Nag, 2014). The color saffron in Hinduism represents pious renunciation of material concerns (Bhattacharjee, 2017), and the election campaign drew on this motif to portray a period of “purification,” in which orange “fire” would “cleanse” society of its “impurities.” The fulcrum of this development was Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which combine political Hinduism or Hindutva with populist discourses to construct a narrative of a civilizational state that is in “crisis” and requires a “strongman” to lead “the people” back to the glorious Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Kingdom) (Lefèvre, 2020). Modi’s Hindutva populist narrative first took form in his home state of Gujarat, where he was chief minister from 2002 to 2014. However, his comprehensive wins in the 2014 and 2019 general elections have empowered and mainstreamed the Hindutva populist narrative across India.

The civilizationist ideals of India’s right-wing Hindu movement combine the elements of religion, populism, and nationalism in an emotionally charged politics. Various groups and political parties have helped in shaping this distinct Hindutva identity. Civilizationist populism has led to changes in laws to target religious

minorities and foster an environment where vigilante groups feel empowered to use violence to express their anger toward “the Other.” As a result, India has experienced a sharp decline in its democratic freedoms and now confronts the rise of “electoral authoritarianism.” The attendant “crackdowns” on civil liberties have seen freedom of expression, assembly, and religion increasingly imperiled (Freedom House, 2021; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021).

This paper explores the complex role of nostalgia, aspiration, culture, and history in the emergence and development of civilizationist populism. Methodologically speaking, it adopts a comprehensive case study approach to capture the complex nature of interactions across populism, nostalgia, aspiration, history, culture, and political mobilization. By reviewing Hindutva discourse in India, this paper demonstrates the role of sacralized historical narratives and their emotional appeal in creating a conducive environment for populist civilizationism. We also explore possible links between this discourse and the use of violence by the right-wing groups toward those considered “Other.” India’s selection as a case study is based on news and existing literature that points at the widespread manifestation of the phenomenon from organizational grassroots levels to the government itself. Throughout this paper, the use of sacralized nostalgia, aspiration, history, and culture is explored to make sense of the construction of populist civilizationist. It also

highlights the promotion of violence by vigilante groups that draw on Hindutva civilizationist discourses.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. It begins by detailing the extant literature on civilizationist populism to establish a theoretical framework to guide the case study analysis. The paper then discusses the characteristics of Hinduism and elaborates on the distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva. It details Hindutva ideology, tracing its evolution as a political-religious formation and its reliance on sacred narrative construction. The following section briefly discusses grassroots organizations that exhibit this populist discourse. These organizations mainly belong to the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella term that covers a range of groups attached to India's militant National Volunteer Organization (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, RSS)—a right-wing, Hindu nationalist volunteer movement—including the Universal Hindu Council (Vishva Hindu Parishad, VHP) and the VHP's youth organization the Brigade of Hanuman (Bajrang Dal, BD). In the final substantive section, the paper focuses on political parties and their leaders, who have deployed Hindutva discourse to mobilize supporters and voters, sometimes merged with populism and at other times ignoring it. The paper concludes with a short section drawing together the findings and marking out pathways for future research.

Civilizationalist Populism

Culture and religion have taken center stage in the most recent waves of populist discourse worldwide (Elçi,

2021; Yilmaz and Morieson 2021; Brubaker, 2017; Marzouki, McDonnell & Roy, 2016). Civilizationism has been central to this political development. Borrowing heavily from Huntington's (1993) idea of a "clash of civilizations," civilizationism derives from the instrumentalization of religion as a central logic in defining collective identity. Civilizationalist populists have used many of the world's major religions — including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity — to erect a binary where "the opposition between self and the other is not in narrowly national but in broader civilizational terms" (Brubaker, 2017: 1191).

Like all variants of populism, the notion of "the people" is central to civilizationalist populism. In this case, the idea of a sacralized in-group or "virtuous community" aligns closely with the notion of "the true people" central to all populisms. The identity of this sacralized in-group is constructed based on cultural and religious practices. This identity grounding forms the basis for a mobilization of "the people" against both "the corrupt elite" and "the Other" — the antagonist cultural or religious out-group. Assigning foreign or alien status to "the Other" allows civilizationist populists to frame out-group members as sources of anxiety, creating a sense of crisis and victimhood among "the people." Those who are "otherized" in this way become the targets of attacks. This largely manufactured sense of crisis produces, in turn, the demand for populist leadership and organizations and paves the way for ethno-religious clashes, thereby

weakening democracy (Galston, 2018; Lesch, 2020).

How culture, nostalgia, and nationalism are used collectively to construct civilizationist populist binaries of society has not been analyzed. There are, however, studies that show “appeals to religion and culture not only shape populist ideologies but also help mobilize people against other groups and/or the state by generating feelings of belonging, love, passion, fear, anger, and hate, thus shaping the performance of populism” (Yilmaz, Morieson & Demir, 2021: 18; See also DeHanas & Shterin, 2018).

It has been speculated that cultural backlash against globalization and multiculturalism plays a crucial role in empowering right-wing populism (Furedi, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The transnational interpretation of culture enables populist rhetoric to become civilizationist, thus, overcoming the fixed borders of the nation-state. Firstly, culture is considered the key reservoir of transnational identity connecting various national communities, enabling populists to define the collective self in civilizational terms. Cosmopolitan elites championing multicultural, globalist norms and those non-nationals who adhere to an alien culture or minorities who are said to adhere to different cultural values are thus cast as cultural “outsiders.” Secondly, in civilizationist populism, the national culture is defined not in narrowly national but broader civilizational terms. For example, the Turkish culture is part of a broader Muslim culture based on

the Islamic faith. Such a civilizationist interpretation also has some positive implications. For instance, it has allowed Turkish culture to accept otherwise non-national outsiders such as Syrian refugees because Turks and Syrians form part of a broader community, the Islamic ummah. Third, civilizationist populism brings together vertical and horizontal aspects of populism by characterizing the elite both “above” and “external” to the “true people” (Brubaker, 2017). The elite is not only economically and politically dominant but also considered to be culturally alien by embracing other cultures. This allows for a cultural construction of the “in-group” and “out-group” populist identities (de Cesari & Kaya, 2019).

Populism draws on nostalgia to construct an idealized and at times sacralized lost “homeland” or culture that the leader or movement promises to restore. This feature makes populism “a backward-looking reactionary ideology, reflecting a deep sense of nostalgia for the good old days” (Betz & Johnson, 2004: 311). This revisionist, romanticized loss of the imagined “golden age” is further intensified when linked to a globalized or multicultural context (de Cesari & Kaya, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2018; Taggart, 2004). Populists, thus, develop a “selective deployment of the national past” to shape this nostalgia in “the people” that challenges the status quo (Kenny, 2017; Yilmaz 2021).

Elçi (2021: 1) claims that populists “instrumentalize nostalgia in order to create their populist heartland, which is a retrospectively constructed utopia based on an abandoned but

undead past.” In so doing, populists provide both an explanation (Elçi, 2021; Taş, 2020; Lammers & Baldwin, 2020; Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2017) and a solution for current social ills, thereby empowering themselves to restore “lost” glory. The resort to nostalgia foregrounds a comforting past to make the present reassuring and restore notions of belonging, inclusion and continuity (Homolar & Scholz, 2019: 358). The populist leader provides “the people” with the hope of “ontological security in the present” and the promise of restorative justice in the future (Kinnvall, 2014: 322).

Designed to placate “the people,” this nostalgia forms a culturally homogeneous imagination in which “the Other” is present within—but not part of—the society, and its existence is seen as a hindrance to restoring the lost “glory” of the civilizational past. Duyvendak (2011) has researched this process in the West, where populists leverage resentment over globalization and immigration in extensively nostalgic narratives. He found that “(t)he past is portrayed as a closed and conflict-free whole, carried by citizens who all basically shared the same beliefs, norms and traditions” (Duyvendak (2011: 84). Consequently, “the Other” is not only cast as a hindrance to achieving a return to a utopian past but is a constant reminder of the “loss” of this former civilizational glory.

CIVILIZATIONALIST POPULISM

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values are thus cast as cultural “outsiders.” Secondly, in civilizationist populism, the national culture is defined not in narrowly national but broader civilizational terms. For example, the Turkish culture is part of a broader Muslim culture based on the Islamic faith. Such a civilizationist interpretation also has some positive implications. For instance, it has allowed Turkish culture to accept otherwise non-national outsiders such as Syrian refugees because Turks and Syrians form part of a broader community, the Islamic ummah. Third, civilizationist populism brings together vertical and horizontal aspects of populism by characterizing the elite both “above” and “external” to the “true people” (Brubaker, 2017). The elite is not only economically and politically dominant but also considered to be culturally alien by embracing other cultures. This allows for a cultural construction of the “in-group” and “out-group” populist identities (de Cesari & Kaya, 2019).

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Types of Populism in India

Populism has been defined in many ways, including as a leader-centered political strategy, an ideology, a political style, and a discursive process or a frame. In the present paper, we draw on the prevalent definition of populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde, 2004: 544) that takes on its full form when combined with elements of other ideologies, such as nationalism, socialism, or conservatism (Yilmaz & Saleem, 2021; de la Torre, 2019: 7; Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Religion is one such ideological element used by various contemporary populists — from Presidents Trump and Erdoğan to Prime Ministers Modi and Imran Khan — to “thicken” their populist appeals.

Populism in India has been attached to religion and nationalism but also other ideological elements and markers, like caste, class, ethnicity, and welfarism. Kaustuv Chakrabarti and Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay (2021) note that populist rhetoric in India usually peaks around elections as politicians seek to mobilize voters.

Jaffrelot and Tillin (2017) identify several strands of populist politics in India. The first is personalized populism, exemplified by Indira Gandhi’s approach in the 1960s. To consolidate her political base and head off opposition from powerful regional leaders within her Congress Party, Gandhi combined welfarism and protectionist economic policies with a highly personalized appeal to

the rural poor against the established Congress Party elite whom she accused of holding back progress (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017). However, once these vaguely leftist populist strategies started failing in the 1970s, Gandhi’s leadership turned authoritarian, culminating in the so-called “emergency period” from 1975 to 1977 when the prime minister ruled by decree under a declared state of emergency.

Jaffrelot and Tillin’s second type is the populism of Prime Minister Modi, which will be discussed in detail later in the article. The third type is welfare populism, prevalent in southern India and based on regional identity politics. Here, along with welfare policies and the free provision of consumer goods, popular leaders like M. G. Ramachandran in Tamil Nadu and N.T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh, both of whom made their mark in regional films, rallied the masses against the Congress Party, dominated by the Hindi-speaking northern part of the country.

HINDUTVA POPULISM: ORGANIZATIONS

This section details the various organizations that make up India's Sangh Parivar (which translates roughly to "Hindutva family"), including the influential RSS. In so doing, we show how Hindutva nationalism has drawn on the ideas of culture, nostalgia, aspiration, and history in propagating its particular form of civilizationalist populism.



Member of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Or RSS workers take a part in a route march on January 12, 2020 in Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

THE RASHTRIYA SWAYAMSEVAK SANGH

The RSS was the brainchild of K.B. Hedgewar, a former Congress Party member who formed the organization in Nagpur in 1925 (Andersen & Damle, 2019a). As the non-political face of the Hindutva movement, it was conceived as a militant, revivalist and nationalistic organization to reinforce Hindu identity and buttress military skills among the Hindu population during the late period of British colonial rule. Around the same time, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar established the Hindu Mahasabha (HM), a political party promoting Hindutva. Despite

differences with Hedgewar, Savarkar was closely aligned with the RSS, which nevertheless largely stayed out of politics in the period before independence and the 1947 Partition of India. Instead, it focused on cultivating a generation of "proper young Hindus" along the lines of Hindutva ideology, intending to subordinate non-Hindu socio-religious elements in South Asia (Yilmaz, Morison & Demir, 2021: 8). Today, the RSS has an estimated six million swayamsevaks (members) across India (Friedrich, 2020).



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In line with Hindutva politics, the RSS did not directly challenge British colonial rule, a position championed by the group's second leader, M.S. Golwalkar. Thus, other than Savarkar and Hedgewar, RSS leaders seldom found themselves in trouble with the British colonial authorities (Patwardhan, 2014; Andersen & Damle, 2019b: 29–35). However, during the 1940s, under the leadership of Golwalkar, the RSS became heavily influenced by Italian fascism, Nazism,

and British-style disciplinary military training (Andersen & Damle, 2019b: 29–35), and the movement became increasingly wedded to the notion of Hindustan as a “civilization in crisis.” In his book, *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939), Golwalkar wrote,

To keep up purity of the nation and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races, the Jews. National pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into a united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by (Patwardhan, 2014).

Golwalkar’s classification of society and worldviews was rooted in a fascist ideology in which the Hindu nation was cast as supreme to all others (Sarkar, 1993).

The RSS has always clashed with Congress due to the latter’s “secular” nature. For instance, for more than fifty years after 1947, the RSS objected to the tricolor national flag of India, based on a design of the Congress Party that includes a green stripe to represent the Muslim population of the country. Instead, the RSS has maintained that the flag should be only saffron-colored, thereby excluding the Muslim element and extolling *bharatmatta* (or “Mother India”) (Andersen & Damle 2019b, 24–26). Moreover, the RSS maintains its commitment to philanthropy-led activities to chisel “model Hindus” (Chatterji et al. 2020). Still, “a number of volunteers from the RSS have

over time graduated into politicians, forming their own political parties and becoming key stakeholders in the government” (Yilmaz, Morieson & Demir 2021, 8). The most prominent examples of RSS-groomed politicians are Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi.

The RSS also seeks inspiration from particular strands of ancient Hindu culture to fashion a political Hinduism. Ancient texts, such as the *Dharmaśāstras*[1] and the *Manusmṛiti*,[2] have been hailed as “the basis of the spiritual and divine march of the nation.” The *Manusmṛiti*’s author is also hailed as “the first, greatest and the wisest lawgiver of mankind” (Patwardhan, 2014). However, this text has a highly ethnocentric and glorified view of Hindu customs and traditions, one that deeply embeds problematic ideas, such as the caste system, the subordination of women, and xenophobia toward non-Hindus (Sawant, 2020; Shantha, 2020). Sawant (2020) notes that the traces of this cultural ideology are present in the RSS and the BJP. For example, several of their members have defended the ideas of “cleansing” the *Bharat* (motherland) and expressed support for the caste system (the Indian Constitution forbids discrimination based on caste and outlaws practices associated with “untouchability”), failed to see women outside the role of motherhood, and promoted an environment of forced re-conversion (Andersen & Damle, 2019a; Jha, 2016).

However, Andersen (2018) notes that in the post-Golwalkar period, the RSS has opened itself to non-Hindus so that they might share the

Hindutva culture. But this openness is still rooted in discriminatory attitudes deeply embedded in a sense of cultural superiority. For instance, Ramapada Pal, a key preacher in the RSS, argues that “the superiority of the Hindu kingdom” is undeniable (Nair, 2015). The RSS leaders have also argued that “if a Muslim living in India chooses their god before India, then why should he be allowed to live in our country? This country belongs to Hindus first” (Nair, 2015). While their booklet rationalizes this in ultra-nationalist terms:

Non-Hindus must be assimilated with the Hindu way of life. The words ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian’ denote a religious phenomenon, while the word ‘Hindu’ is synonymous with the nation. Even in the United States, it is emphasized that non-Americans should be assimilated into ‘Anglo-Saxon’ culture (Andersen & Damle, 2019a).

Thus, the idea of glorified ancient culture, which was the basis of a glorious future, is a key pillar in the RSS’s constructed Hindu nationalism.

As Leidig (2016) notes, this feeling of cultural superiority also exhibits “a nostalgic yearning for a glorified Vedic period – Hinduism’s ‘Golden Age’” that, coupled with the use of historical narratives to paint Muslims as the “tyrant invaders,” legitimizes the RSS’s call for “purification.”

Since 2014, the Sangh Parivar has pushed for “a pro-Hindutva agenda in the name of cultural nationalism” (Leidig, 2016). In this narrative, the “golden age” was a period when Hindus accomplished the greatest scientific and philosophical feats,

changing the destiny of humanity (Thapar, 2020; Jain & Lasseeter, 2018; Leidig, 2016). Additionally, a mythical martyrdom is fabricated by contorting historical legends to engender a sense of victimhood of “the people” and to vilify “the Other” — primarily the “Muslim invaders.” This process of reshaping history to construct a “golden” civilizational account is coupled with nostalgia that seeks to recreate it. It is in this sense that we argue that the Sangh Parivar has produced a kind of “saffronization” of history in India —namely, where the non-Hindu elements are systematically stripped out in an elaborate attempt at rewriting of Indian history that involves expunging the Muslim elements (Thapar, 2020; Jain & Lasseeter, 2018).

Crucially, this narrative pushes the idea that, rather than championing independence for India, Congress’ rule after 1947 was just a continuation of the colonial rule of the Muslim Mughals and then the British Raj. Jawaharlal Nehru is considered a covert Muslim (his grandfather’s apparent conversion from Islam to Hinduism is cast as disingenuous). A fake quote by Nehru is widely shared by the right-wing websites to substantiate this narrative: “By education, I am an Englishman, by views an internationalist, by culture a Muslim and a Hindu only by accident of birth.” This quote was also shared on Twitter by Amit Malviya, head of the BJP’s National Information and Technology Department (IT Cell) and a member of the BJP National Executive in 2015 (Malviya, 2015; Factly, 2020).

THE VISHVA HINDU PARISHAD (UNIVERSAL HINDU COUNCIL)

Despite receiving just 25% of the vote in the 1994 mayoral election in Istanbul, Erdoğan won, holding the post until 1998. Then, antagonizing the establishment, he was jailed for four months on trumped-up charges of “anti-secular” behavior and subsequently banned from politics. Erdoğan’s experience of “political persecution” at the hands of “an unjust establishment” is central to his political rise. Soon after being released from prison, he and several others in the “modernist wing” of the Millî Görüş founded the AKP in 2001.

The party swept to power in the 2002 elections, and in 2003, after the Constitutional Court overturned the ban on him holding political office (a move that has never been satisfactorily explained), he became a member of parliament and then prime minister. Given the longstanding (and often justified) sense among the country’s pious Muslim population that it was the victim of “persecution” by the secular elite, Erdoğan’s rise to power represented the “voice of the people” moving to the center of Turkish politics. Moreover, his ascension came in the wake of tremendous popular discontent with the deep and successive economic and political crises that roiled Turkey under the rule of the pro-status quo parties throughout the 1990s.

Erdoğan’s good fortune continued in that the painful (and electorally toxic) reforms needed to right-size the economy after the severe crisis of 2001 had already

been implemented by the previous government. Thus, although he came to power as an “outsider,” he took over an economy that had already begun to recover significantly and move smoothly. In other words, the comprehensive structural reforms in the post-crisis era, plus the exceptionally supportive overall domestic and global circumstances, helped Erdoğan achieve remarkable economic outcomes during his first term in office (2003–2007). As Spicer has recently noted, “Erdoğan leveraged the economic rebound and a diplomatic pivot to the West to bring about a decade of prosperity. Poverty and unemployment plunged. Inflation that was in triple digits a decade earlier touched 5%, boosting the Turkish lira’s appeal for locals and foreigners.”[15]

However, things started to change during his second term (2007–2011). Even though the economy resumed after a relatively short interruption during the Great Recession and returned to the pre-crisis growth path, there were visible signs of deterioration in the quality of growth, including declines in total factor productivity (TFP) and foreign direct investment (FDI) as well as weaker job creation. As a result, although growth in the third period (2011–2015) was above average, its quality continued to decline, and it quickly moved away from sustainability. Moreover, institutions have been further destabilized through destructive policies and a patchy record of reform over the

period. Recent indicators about Erdoğan's fourth and most recent period in office, after the new executive presidential system was introduced in June 2018. Now we see that Erdoğan is heading toward a kind of "Pyrrhic victory." Having brought the entire political order to heel by taming institutions, Erdoğan looks likely to reap a bitter harvest, given the damage wreaked in the process.

THE BAJRANG DAL (BRIGADE OF HANUMAN)

The Bajrang Dal (BD) — the "Brigade of Hanuman" — is the youth wing of the VHP and was founded in 1984. The name references the monkey god Hanuman, a companion and aide to Lord Ram in the Hindu epic Ramayana (Friedrich, 2020; Doniger, 2018). In 2018, the CIA categorized the BD as a "militant religious organization" due to its targeting of Christians and Muslims in India (Friedrich, 2020).

The BD primarily recruits men between the ages of 15 and 35. Its proclaimed ideology is "Seva, Suraksha, Sanskar," which translates into "service, safety, and culture," although a militant championing of Hindu religion and culture is much more critical to the BD. It has provided VHP, RSS, and BJP with the necessary "muscle" during instances of communal violence (Ahuja, 2019). As a youth group, it is well-placed to infiltrate and disrupt human rights protests, which in India are often led by young people, particularly students. On numerous occasions, BD members have attacked Kashmiri

students for the apparent "threat" they pose to "Indian unity" by emphasizing ethnic and religious diversity (Mishra & Jha, 2019). In 2019, a terrorist attack left several Indian soldiers wounded and dead in Pulwama, Indian Kashmir. The BD mobilized soon afterward, attacking and injuring Kashmir students. One activist justified the actions as a means "to teach the students a lesson so that no one can ever dream of doing what had happened in Pulwama" (Mishra & Jha, 2019). Despite their vandalism and vigilantism, over 1,000 BD members have been given military training in recent years. The parent body VHP has justified this by saying, "The main aim of such training camps is to train workers for Rashtra Raksha (National security) which includes women safety, cow protection, temples security and of course protecting Hindus" (Jaiswal, 2019). The youth receive training from RSS-trained personnel or ex-army or police officers (Jaiswal, 2019).

The blend of militant, physical training and deep Hindutva convictions has, for decades, enabled BD youth to incite violent means to "protect" Hindus. For instance, in broad daylight in 1999, Sheikh Rehman, a Muslim trader, was set on fire in the eyes of a crowd of over 400 people after his arms were chopped off by BD (HRW, 1999). In periods when the BJP has been in power at the federal level in India (such as now and in the late 1990s), the BD has been emboldened. It now regularly attacks non-Hindus, targets liberal groups on university campuses for their human rights advocacy, and is a key participant in India's growing trend of anti-love jihad campaigns

(Friedrich, 2020; Ahuja, 2019; Mishra & Jha, 2019; PTI, 2016).

In 1999, Human Rights Watch (1999) interviewed a VHP volunteer. Part of that discussion exemplifies the role of Sangh Parivar as the vehicle of Hindutva:

The VHP is for the promotion of religion, the Bajrang Dal is for the protection of Hindus, and the BJP is for politics. The work systems are different, but the aim is the same. We all want akand bharat: all nations under India. We want what we had before independence, minus the British. We should have a Hindu nation. Other religions can do whatever they want, but they should not insult Hinduism. We also don't want them to distribute their vote but to give it to the Hindus. Everyone will come together to support against [the] Congress [party].

HINDUTVA POPULISM: PARTIES

Before discussing Hindutva populism, it is crucial to mark out how it differs from Hindu nationalism. Hindu nationalism claims that Hindu religious or cultural identity is the primary identity of all Indians. It rejects territorial nationalism and argues that religious minorities must accept Hindu culture if they want to be "true" Indians. Hindu populism, a thin ideology, utilizes Hindu nationalism as the basis of populist politics (Jaffrelot, 2007). Unsurprisingly, while the two are conceptually distinct, there is considerable overlap between them.

Gandhi statue in India. Photo: Arthur Simoes.



HINDUTVA POPULISM: PARTIES

Numerous authors have researched this question and concluded that while Gandhi was one of the most, if not the most, popular leader, he was not a populist. Chakrabarti and Bandyopadhyay (2021) discuss Gandhi's fight with the British elite and his identification with the ordinary Indian but do not characterize him as a populist. Jaffrelot and Tillin (2017) write about populism in India but do not focus on Gandhi. They start their analysis from the 1960s. Sajjan Kumar (2019) also rejects calling Gandhi a populist, noting that:

a charismatic-popular-populist pitch doesn't automatically transcend into populism. It requires demagoguery wherein hitherto suppressed but popular desires get articulated by a mesmerizer who emerges as the savior. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal

Nehru were charismatic but not populist as they assumed a guiding role vis-à-vis the people rather than getting subsumed by their worldview. Gandhi didn't hesitate to withdraw the non-cooperation movement in the aftermath of Chauri Chaura when it gained momentum, and Nehru stood for secularism and scientific rationality in the midst of Partition's mass frenzy.

Hence, linking Modi's populism to Gandhi's Hindu politics is a mistake. Unlike populists in their rhetoric, Gandhi did not consider his enemies "evil," nor did he present the oppressed masses as wholly innocent or "pure." Thus, "corruption" to the extent that it appeared in Gandhi's rhetoric, was not only external but also internal. Moreover, Manichean binaries, a feature of populism worldwide, were not part of Gandhi's politics (Saleem 2021).



HINDU NATIONALISM AND HINDU POPULISM

Hindu nationalism started to become popular in the late 19th century. It was a diverse combination of Hindu revivalist movements, such as Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj, which tried to make Hinduism a “modern” religion that more closely resembled the Abrahamic faiths in shape or form. Islam and Christianity were models for Hindu revivalists but also threats since the revivalists feared that Hindus might convert. As the British took small steps toward introducing Indians to Western-style elections, this revivalism was also evolved in Hindu consciousness and Hindu nationalism. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, mentioned earlier, was the first ideologue of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva, and his HM party became the first party to champion it in Indian politics. Yet Savarkar was a nationalist, not a populist. His goal was to unite the majority (the Hindus) against the elite, but he was not “anti-elite” as such, drawing much support from the Hindu upper castes, businessmen, and aristocracy (Visana, 2020; Tharoor, 2018: 40–50).

Indeed, the HM had urban, high caste roots, much like the pre-Gandhian Congress (Bapu, 2013: 26–43), and so was not an anti-elite party. Moreover, unlike Congress, it avoided directly confronting the British as Congress did. It refused to participate in both the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s and later the Quit India Movement, demonstrating its pro-British government stance (Gondhalekar & Bhattacharya, 1999).

In sum, the Hindu Mahasabha was a Hindu nationalist party, but populism was not part of the strategy. This difference between right-wing nationalism and right-wing populism is important to keep in mind. Although there is currently overlap and numerous right-wing nationalist parties have become populist, right-wing nationalism and populism are not the same. Almost every right-wing populist is a nationalist, but not every right-wing nationalist is a populist (Saleem, 2021).

FROM THE BHARTIYA JANA SANGH TO THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

The Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS) was established as a Hindutva party in 1951 by Syama Prasad Mukherjee. Although Mukherjee had left the Congress long before due to ideological disagreements and joined the HM, he was made a cabinet minister by Prime Minister Nehru after independence. However, he continued to differ with Congress, such as its policy of outlawing the RSS. In 1950, the Liaquat–Nehru Pact^[9] became the final straw for Mukherjee, who resigned from the cabinet. Later, he left the HM and established the BJS to represent the “interests” of Hindus (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019; Lahiry, 2005). It graduated to become the primary Hindutva party and won seats at both state and national levels. In 1977, the BJS merged with the Janata Party to oppose Indra Gandhi’s authoritarian practices and emergency proclamation. A large majority of its members later resigned from the Janata Party and formed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980.

One of the major ideologues of the Hindutva movement was Deendeyal Upadhyaya, who was for many years a top leader in the BJS. Upadhyaya developed a humane face for Hindutva, known as “integral humanism.” His philosophy focused on seeing life as a whole and rejecting conflict based on class or caste and between the individual and society. Following Savarkar, he rejected the idea of territorial nationalism. Instead, he argued that nations can succeed only if they follow their own dharma,

which is closely aligned with their culture and traditions. Upadhyaya believed India’s failure after independence was because it did not follow its dharma, based on local culture and traditions, which for him were Hindu culture and civilization. This was Hindu nationalism explained in a more humane way, but it was still Hindu nationalism (Tharoor, 2020). Upadhyaya said: “We shall have to concede that our nationality is none other than Hindu nationality... If any outsider comes into this country, he shall have to move in step and adjust himself with Hindu Nationality” (cited in Kulkarni, 2017). However, Upadhyaya, as mentioned, was no populist. He was more of an ideologue, organizer, and Hindu civilizationist. An RSS apparatchik, he was seconded to the BJS and remained part of the party until his death.

There is little evidence to support that BJP went beyond right-wing Hindutva-inspired nationalism to promote populist civilizationist populism. We need look no further than the three-term BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee for evidence of this. Vajpayee, who led BJP in the early phase in the 1980s and 1990s, was a Hindutva apologist (Hindustan Times, 2018). And his discourse was often divisive. For example, in a speech in 2002, he drew the common Hindutva populist distinction between “us” and “them” by asserting:

Wherever Muslims live, they don't like to live in co-existence with others; they don't like to mingle with others; and instead of propagating their ideas in a peaceful manner, they want to spread their faith by resorting to terror and threats. The world has become alert to this danger (cited in Varadarajan, 2018).

Yet Vajpayee, a poet and author of many books, was careful in propagating Hindu civilization, and he was not a populist politician. He was respectful even to his opponents, and his speeches were more soft attacks than rants and harangues.

In this early period, Hindutva nationalism was used in a non-populist style. Leading up to the anti-Muslim Gujarat riots in 2002, Vajpayee tried to distance the BJP from the sectarian activities of the Sangh Parivar (Nair, 2009). He even called the “new” Hindutva problematic, noting: “I accept the Hindutva of Swami Vivekananda, but the type of Hindutva being propagated now is wrong, and one should be wary of it” (Varadarajan, 2018). Following the riots in Gujarat, he even tried to force Narendra Modi, then the state's chief minister, to resign but failed due to pressure from the RSS (Nag, 2015). In 2003, the VHP's newly elected general secretary, Giriraj Kishore, called Vajpayee a “pseudo-Hindu” because of his outreach to Pakistan, such as in the Lahore Pact^[10] signed in 1999 (Nag, 2015).

While the BJS and early BJP centered their policies around Hindutva, it was more in the framework of nationalism than

civilizational populism. As Leidig (2020) notes

Hindutva was not truly ‘mainstreamed’ until the election of the current prime minister, Narendra Modi, in 2014. In order to construct a narrative that furthered Hindu insecurity, Modi mobilized his campaign by appealing to recurring themes of a Muslim ‘threat’ to the Hindu majority. The result is that Hindutva has become synonymous with Indian nationalism.

Before the 2002 riots, Modi was a relative unknown outside of Gujarat (Hosen, 2020). Groomed within the RSS system, he rose up the ranks and was appointed chief minister of the state in 2002. Following his back-to-back wins in state elections, he led the BJP in national elections in 2014 and became prime minister, winning a second term in 2019. In gaining a legislative majority in two consecutive general elections, Modi pulled off a feat that no prime minister had achieved since Indira Gandhi in the early 1970s.

Under Modi, the BJP has taken a new direction. There is a transparent element of classic populism with both horizontal and vertical dimensions, but what is unique is the civilizational construction of a new narrative that goes beyond the BJP's earlier focus on Hindutva nationalism. To love the country and dharma is now a lifestyle that has pushed the saffronization process into all aspects of social and political life. Moreover, as Chacko (2018) discusses, under Modi, the BJP has adopted a new neoliberal chauvinism that calls for India to

become a global leader in commerce and technology. This new narrative links Hindutva pride with a call for economic development so that India can attain its prominence in the community of nations that was lost with the “Muslim invaders” in the 16th century—in other words, to “make India great again.”

McDonnell and Caberea (2019) observe that the BJP’s division of the population into what the authors call “the people” and “the others” does not reflect a categorical distinction between Hindus and non-Hindus. Instead, its definition of “the people” is judged on the parameters of how readily one engages with the national culture and its values (basically conservative Hindu culture). Thus, Manohar Lal Khattar, the BJP chief minister of Haryana, said, “Muslims can live here, but in this country, they will have to stop eating beef” (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019: 493). This nativist element to the BJP’s populism draws on divisive issues that invariably arouse popular sentiments (Ammassari, 2018: 8). While these measures are presented as policy decisions taken to protect people’s interests, they are, in fact, political moves designed to mobilize voters in support of restoring the lost Hindutva civilization that pre-dates the Muslim “invasion” (Ammassari, 2018; Jain & Lasserer, 2018).

The BJP, in line with populist tradition, targets elites (i.e., Congress) and presents itself as a grassroots “people party,” one that transformed a tea seller boy into the leader of the world’s largest democracy. Modi and the party “stress his own underdog

background as a chaiwala (tea seller),” positioning him as a “humble yet anointed Hindu leader” (Rao, 2018: 177). However, in a Hindutva fashion, some party posters present him as “sacralized with a halo indicating Hindu symbolism of gods who glow like surya (the sun god)” (Rao, 2018: 177). Apart from the elite, religious minorities are also “otherized” as “internal outsiders” and are usually accused of working with external “outsiders” such as India’s nemesis, Pakistan (Peker, 2019: 31–32). Elites and “internal” outsiders such as opposition leaders also merged as singular targets in BJP attacks (Peker, 2019: 32).

Under Modi, the BJP has become unapologetic and blatant in embracing the RSS. This has helped it openly embrace civilizationism in a program to alter the social fabric of India (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017: 184). The “clash of civilizations” and superiority of “the people” and their faith is the crux. Yogi Adityanath, often presented as a “poster boy” of Hindutva and the BJP, is a monk turned politician and the current chief minister of UP (Gupta, 2018). He is a long-time Hindutva preacher and political advocate of extreme violent Hindutva. Despite being the chief minister of a state with over 200 million people of different faiths, he has openly used the Hindu Rashtra rhetoric in calling for the establishment of a Hindu polity as he sees it as a “way of life” (Hindustan Times, 2017). Those who do not abide by this way of life will be “taught” a lesson “in the language they understand (violence),” according to the Yogi (Hindustan Times, 2017). In one speech, he assured, “If given

a chance, we will install statues of Goddess Gauri, Ganesh and Nandi [Hindu deities] in every mosque” (Hindustan Times, 2017).

In recent years, UP has seen a boom in Hindu religious tourism. This has gone hand in hand with the rising pressure to “reclaim” mosques that were “stolen” from Hindus so that they might be re-established as temples (Sikander, 2020), as mentioned above. These arguments have justified and encouraged the ever-growing vigilantism (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Gupta, 2018). Yogi has even popularized his dog, Kalu, on online platforms as a vegan dog who does not consume meat and abides by the Hindutva code (Hindustan Times, 2019).

Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, is also home to the country’s largest Muslim population, and this has always fueled Hindutva “fear” that demographic shifts will see Muslims eventually outnumber Hindus. A manifestation of this “fear” is the previously mentioned “love jihad” campaigns that demonise interfaith marriage. Adityanath warned the “love jihadists” and said, “I warn those who conceal identity and play with our sisters’ respect. If you don’t mend your ways, your ‘Ram naam satya’ (chant associated with Hindu funerals) journey will begin.” As a result, a law criminalising interfaith marriage was passed in Uttar Pradesh, and the VHP and BD increased targeting and harassment of interfaith couples especially Muslim grooms (Asthana, 2021; Pradhan, 2020). Yogi’s firebrand speeches also have elements of sexism and

propagate gender inequality. He once said, “if they [Muslims] take one Hindu girl, we will take 100 Muslims girls [...] if they kill one Hindu, there will be 100 that we...” and waited for the crowd to chant “kill” (Crabtree, 2017). The victim narrative is profoundly violent and militant with no respect for religious freedom or even life.

Simultaneously, the two most recent terms of BJP in office have systematically blurred the lines between history and Hindutva fiction in the school curriculum (Jain & Lasseter, 2018). The “culture” is being saffronized as “the true colour of Indian history is saffron and to bring about cultural changes we have to rewrite history,” said RSS’ Manmohan Vaidya approving these changes (Jain & Lasseter, 2018). Redefining India has focused on putting forth the “Hindu first” narrative in which Hindus are cast as the rightful and original inhabitants of the land who have been marginalized by invader Muslims and Christians. Unsurprisingly, there is a party-wide commitment to instrumentalizing religion in education. Prakash Javadekar, Minister of Human Resource Development, praised this move, saying: “Our government is the first government to have the courage to even question the existing version of history that is being taught in schools and colleges” (Jain & Lasseter, 2018).

Modi himself has dabbled in the nostalgia of a fictitious Hindu culture at various instances. For example, he has promoted the idea that Ganesh, the deity with an elephant head, reflected ancient Hindu advances in

science, demonstrating the apparent plastic surgery skills of the ancient Hindus; Modi even claimed that genetic scientists existed at that time (Rahman, 2014). Modi is on the record saying that the chariot of the Hindu God Rama was the world's first airplane, while Biplab Deb, the chief minister of Tripura, claimed that ancient Indians created an ancient form of the internet (BBC, 2018; Rahman, 2014).

To restore and “protect” the “golden age” of Hindu culture, Hindutva civilizationist populism has seen the BJP introduce laws, such as the highly controversial National Register of Citizens, which seeks to make India “Hindu by character, by culture.” These moves are cast as benign because the policies offer select persecuted minorities from certain neighboring states pathways to Indian citizenship while deporting Muslims who cannot prove they are not illegal migrants (Human RightsWatch, 2020; McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019: 488). Amit Shah, the main force behind this legislation, defends the act as follows: “Infiltrators are like termites in the soil of Bengal. A Bharatiya Janata Party government will pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal” (Al Jazeera, 2018). As the home minister,

Shah was behind a controversial set of policies directed at India's only Muslim-majority state, Kashmir, from 2019 onward that included abolishing Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution —dividing Kashmir and abolishing its special autonomy guaranteed since the 1940s, and making it a union territory governed directly by Delhi—as well as the illegal incarcerations of thousands of Kashmiris, and the world's most protracted internet blackout ever imposed by a democracy (Dey, 2019). The general trend is union territories graduating to become autonomous Indian states within the Indian Union. Kashmir is the only instance in the 74 years of Indian history of moving in the other direction (PTI, 2019).

In this context, the promise of the BJP as given in the political slogan “sabka saath sabka vikas” (together with all, development for all) seems hollow, showing the clear direction the party has taken by embracing Hindutva civilizationist populism and imagining and imposing conservative Hindu culture as the “real” Indian culture.

CONCLUSION

In exploring India's saffronization, this paper has shed much-needed light on ideas that are at times either ignored or not fully explored. First, there is an attempt to distinguish between Hindutva, a political ideology, and the faith of Hinduism. The discourse shows that Hinduism is a highly plural and flexible philosophy compared to the more structured Hindutva. While Hinduism can be traced back thousands of years, Hindutva's history is less than two centuries. Second, Hindutva or Hindu nationalism is not the same as Hindu populism. Due to Prime Minister Modi's use of both these political ideologies, many authors incorrectly conflate them. Thus, the use of Hindutva by political actors does not strictly make them religious populists. Nor is India's civilizational Hindutva populism strictly identarian because while it stands for "a Hindu way of life" and not Hinduism itself, it heavily relies on creating a Hindu identity of "the people," which excludes other faiths.

This distinction enables the present article to take the long view and explore the development of recent issues while not focusing narrowly on the last two decades of Indian politics. We, thus, look at Hindutva populism within the BJP and other Indian right-wing parties. This investigation reveals the prevalence of Hindutva as a cornerstone of nationalism pre-existed the BJP's 2014 electoral win under the leadership of Narendra Modi. However, its current civilizationist populism was absent from the earlier discourse, or at least leaders such

as Vajpayee kept it away from the party. Thus, the mainstreaming by the Sangh Parivar of Hindutva ideology in BJP politics has deep roots even as civilizational populism only broke through in the last few years. This study is an important contribution to this theoretical chronology of the rise of saffron populism in mainstream Indian politics.

This study also shows that Hindutva is currently a civilizational populist narrative that is the force behind India's "saffron tide." At the heart of this populism is not a simple love for one's nation or one's culture or religion. There is a clear sense of nostalgia of a glorified bygone era and a populist rhetoric that defines non-Hindus and liberal or secular Hindus as "the Other." This helps promote a cultural "crisis" where "the true people" are cast as victims of centuries of oppression and overlordship from "invaders" (first the Muslim Mughals, then the Christian Europeans, especially the British), raising the question of ontological security. Sadly, but not surprisingly, there is both an explicit and implicit thread of violence embedded in this populism. Cultural pride and longing for the lost "homeland" rationalizes all problems—from national security to social challenges—in this framework and pins them on "the Other." The BJP's position in power and its promotion of this populism through legislation and changes in the school curriculum allow the RSS and the Sang Parivar to implement saffronization on the ground, using violence under cover of laws to "protect victims" (i.e., Hindus).

The saffronization of India started as a Hindutva project, but now it is continuing as Hindutva constructed civilizationist populism. It is embodied by the state and promoted by Hindutva grassroots organizations. Given its appeal, it blurs the lines between fiction and history and supports the constant victimhood of “the people” and vilification of “the Other.” With permanent changes within the state legislation, school curriculum and state structure coupled with emboldening of vigilantism, it is a dangerous trend that threatens to destroy Indian democracy and the Indian polity itself.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Sanskrit theological texts.

[2] An Indian text dating back to 100 CE, which is a major source of Hindi law (Britannica, 2015).

[3] A number of mosques have been built on old temple sites around the country. Nevertheless, most RSS claims that various mosques ought to be turned over are not rooted in facts but on assumptions based on unreliable historical analysis. For instance, archeological excavations have never been able to find evidence of a temple underneath the hotly contested Babri mosque (Al Jazeera, 2019).

[4] An organization of Hindu religious leaders (sants and sadhus).

[5] These are the Hindu equivalent of Christian monasteries.

[6] The Taj Mahal was built by Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor, at the height of the Mughal empire, as a mausoleum for his queen consort, Mumtaz Mehal. It is also his final resting place. Hindutva supporters have sought to delink Indian history from the Persianate age (1000–1765 CE) in which there emerged a marriage of Sanskrit (Hindu) and Persian (Islamic) cultures that resulted in what some scholars consider a hybrid and quite multicultural Ganga–Jamuni civilization (Eaton, 2019; Akins, 2016). Today, the right-wing in India refutes the notion that a Ganga–Jamuni civilization ever existed, considering it a historical fabrication (Balakrishna, 2021).

[7] The series features an Orwellian or Atwood-styled world in which fundamentalist Hindutva-like norms guide social practice (News18, 2020).

[8] The resentment toward Saif Ali Khan runs deeper because, as the son of the last Nawab of Pataudi, he is seen as carrying the legacy of the “Muslim conquerors.” It is interesting to note that Khan’s mother is a famous Hindu actress, Sharmila Tagore and his father served India as the captain of the Indian national cricket team. The union between Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi and Tagore was not scrutinized like that of Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor. This indicates that the intolerance toward interfaith marriage is something of the more recent past, demonstrating the growing power of the Hindutva narrative.

[9] The pact allowed for a peaceful exchange of refugees between India and Pakistan, condemned forced conversions, developed a commission for minorities and allowed for the safeguarding of property lost by migrants during the 1947 Partition (The Indian Express, 2019).

[10] The Lahore Pact is a bilateral agreement between India and Pakistan to curb the use and proliferation of nuclear arms in South Asia and was negotiated as part of a broader move to ease tensions between the two countries (UN, 1999).



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