

# The Role of Populism In Modern Democracies: A Study With Special Reference To India

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**Abstract-** *This paper explores the role of populism in modern democracies, with a focus on India. It examines the rise of populist political movements, the factors contributing to their success, and their effects on democratic institutions, governance, and political discourse. Using India as a case study, the paper evaluates the populist strategies of political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, and explores how populist rhetoric has influenced the political landscape. The paper also considers the potential implications of populism on democratic stability, social cohesion, and institutional integrity in India.*

**Keywords-** Populism, India, BJP, Congress, Political Discourse, Democracy, Governance

## I. INTRODUCTION

Populism is a political approach that emphasizes the contrast between "the people" and "the elite," often portraying the common populace as being undermined by a corrupt or self-serving establishment. Populist movements have become a significant force in modern democracies worldwide, including in India, where political leaders and parties use populist strategies to mobilize support. The Indian political landscape has seen the rise of populist rhetoric, particularly in the form of religious nationalism and promises of inclusive development. This paper explores the role of populism in India, examining the causes behind its rise, the influence of populist leaders, and its impact on democratic norms and institutions.

### Research Question:

What role does populism play in shaping the political discourse, governance, and stability of Indian democracy?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Populism in India is characterized by the use of mass mobilization, appeals to popular sentiments, and the promise to challenge established elites. Scholars like Atul Kohli (2001) have argued that Indian populism is shaped by a combination of economic inequality, caste-based politics, and the dominance of regional and national parties in the political

arena. Kohli observes that populism in India often intersects with identity politics, particularly in the context of religion, caste, and regionalism.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019) suggest that the rise of populism in India, as in other democracies, is closely linked to economic discontent and the perceived failure of political elites to address the concerns of ordinary citizens. The authors argue that populist leaders exploit these feelings of frustration, using nationalist and often divisive rhetoric to build a connection with the electorate.

In contrast, scholars like Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2017) have cautioned that populism in India poses a serious threat to the country's democratic values. Mehta contends that populism can erode the pluralistic fabric of Indian society by fostering division along religious and caste lines, which can destabilize the country's democratic institutions.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative case study approach, focusing on populist political movements in India. It analyzes the strategies used by key political parties and leaders, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and the Indian National Congress (INC), under the leadership of figures such as Indira Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi.

### Data Collection:

- **Qualitative Data:** Analysis of speeches, campaign manifestos, and public statements by populist leaders.
- **Quantitative Data:** Election results and public opinion surveys on populist sentiment, as well as voter turnout and demographic data.

### Analytical Framework:

The paper applies a comparative analysis of populist rhetoric and governance strategies, evaluating how these movements have shaped the political culture, governance structures, and public policies in India. Special attention is

given to the role of media in amplifying populist messages and the relationship between populist leaders and institutional checks and balances.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

##### 4.1. Populism and Electoral Politics in India

The rise of populism in India can be traced back to the early post-independence period, particularly during the leadership of Indira Gandhi. Her declaration of the Emergency in 1975, which suspended civil liberties and curtailed press freedoms, exemplifies the use of populist rhetoric to consolidate power in the name of the "common people." Gandhi's populist appeal was grounded in promises of socio-economic justice, but it also led to an erosion of democratic processes.

In contemporary India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2014 is a clear example of populism in action. Modi's campaign emphasized a "new India" where development, economic growth, and nationalism would replace corruption and elitism. His slogan, "SabkaSaath, Sabka Vikas" (Together with all, development for all), resonates with populist themes of inclusive development. Modi's ability to present himself as a leader of the people, opposed to the political elite, has made him a central figure in the populist discourse of India.

In contrast, the Congress Party, under Rahul Gandhi, has also tried to position itself as a champion of the masses, though it has struggled to match the populist appeal of the BJP. The Congress Party's attempt to frame issues like poverty alleviation and social welfare as central to its agenda reflects its populist strategy. However, the party's association with entrenched political elites and dynastic leadership has limited its effectiveness in mobilizing a populist appeal similar to that of the BJP.

##### 4.2. The Role of Religious Nationalism in Indian Populism

One of the defining characteristics of populism in India, especially under the BJP, is the intertwining of religious nationalism with populist rhetoric. The BJP's emphasis on Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) as a core ideology has provided a unifying narrative for its populist appeal. This form of populism often targets the political and economic elites while drawing a sharp distinction between "the people" (mainly Hindu voters) and "the elite" (which is often portrayed as secular, liberal, or pro-minority).

The 2019 general election in India saw Modi's government capitalize on religious symbols and narratives, especially in the context of the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir and the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. These issues were framed as a victory for the people, aligning populist sentiment with religious identity, thereby strengthening Modi's appeal to the masses.

##### 4.3. The Impact of Populism on Democratic Institutions

Populism in India has had significant consequences for democratic institutions and governance. On one hand, populist leaders like Modi have successfully mobilized public support, leading to high voter turnout and political engagement. On the other hand, populist rhetoric often undermines pluralism and threatens the independence of democratic institutions.

Critics argue that the rise of populism in India has eroded checks and balances, particularly through the weakening of the judiciary, the media, and political opposition. The BJP government has been accused of curbing dissent, with critics pointing to the use of sedition laws, the suppression of protest movements, and the targeting of journalists critical of the government. These actions are seen as attempts to consolidate power and limit democratic freedoms, which are hallmarks of authoritarian populism.

##### 4.4. Populism and Social Polarization

Populism in India has also been associated with rising social polarization, particularly along religious and caste lines. The BJP's emphasis on Hindu nationalism has intensified communal tensions, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. While populist leaders often frame these divisions as a fight between "the people" and the elite, they also contribute to a more fragmented and divided society.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Populism in India has emerged as a powerful force in shaping political discourse and governance. While it has contributed to greater political engagement and mobilization, particularly through promises of inclusive development and national pride, it also poses significant risks to the integrity of democratic institutions. The rise of religious nationalism and the erosion of institutional checks on executive power have raised concerns about the future of Indian democracy.

For Indian democracy to remain robust, it is crucial that populist leaders respect democratic norms, promote social harmony, and safeguard the independence of institutions.

While populism may provide short-term political gains, its long-term consequences could threaten the pluralistic and inclusive nature of Indian democracy.

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