

Rise of Populism in the Post-Truth Era: A Case Study of Modi's Regime

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Abstract

India, the world's largest democracy, has witnessed a surge in Hindu majoritarian politics due to populist leaders like Narendra Modi's exploitation of this domain to consolidate their power. Modi has relied on Hindutva ideologies, benefiting from the Bharatiya Jannata Party-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (BJP-RSS) alliance, especially following the decline of the Congress. Three key events shaped the current political environment: the demolition of the Babri Mosque, the revival of Golwalkar's teachings, and the rise of media-driven 'post-truth' politics. In the post-truth era, political discourse has shifted, allowing for easier manipulation of facts through propaganda, fake news, and populist rhetoric, as the public is more inclined towards emotions and beliefs rather than facts. Despite economic challenges and post-2019 failures in delivering performance, BJP has continued to thrive. The paper explores the rationale behind Modi's rise and manipulation of the traditional political structure, solely depending on right-wing politics in the post-truth age. Despite growing complexities, failure to fulfil promises, and deepening divisions between the rich and the poor, as well as Hindus and Muslims, he has skillfully manipulated vulnerabilities to turn the tide in his favour. It also explores the factors behind Modi's re-election, examining the role of right-wing politics, media influence, and populism in shaping modern Indian politics in the post-truth era.

Keywords: Populism, Post-Truth Era, India, Elections 2024, BJP, Hindu Nationalism

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Introduction

Modern democracy faces acute challenges due to the rise of populism in the era of digitalization and the internet.² The populace relies on social media platforms, allowing populist leaders to manipulate and shape public opinion. Digitalization endures drastic changes, manipulation, dis/misinformation campaigns, and even fake news affecting the democratic processes. Though people are supposed to choose their leaders through voting, politicians use selective notions, propaganda, lies, and nationalism to lure voters' perception of power consolidation.³ In 2024, major democratic nations, including India, Pakistan, Japan, some European states, and the US, went through general elections. Trends in these elections show that parties with anti-immigrant and anti-establishment rhetoric were more likely to win based on their conservative and nationalist agendas.⁴ Similarly, the underlying agenda can vary, but the polls show the rise of right-wing politics everywhere. Right-wing populism or politics uses fear of immigrants and even nationalism as rhetoric to influence the appeals of the common people.⁵ It emphasizes more on anti-migrant agenda, and uses nationalism, while hatred and fear are the basic tendencies to remain aggressive, which is what people want to hear and believe, immigrants taking their jobs, etc.⁶

2016 was considered to be an unsettling year due to the dissemination of unbelievable fake news, propaganda, delusory statements, and mis/disinformation campaigns.⁷ Moreover, the Oxford Dictionary declared "post-truth" as the word of the year in 2016, as its usage in nexus with politics witnessed an unusual spike.⁸ Along with the rise in social media usage and even leaders' dependence on digital media for their campaigns, the manipulation of truth has become more prevalent, especially in democratic nations. During elections, leaders influence the public through

² Biller-Andorno, N., Céu Patrão Neves, M., Laukyte, M. et al., "Opinion on democracy in the digital age," *Publications Office of the European Union*, June 20, 2023, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/078780>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Kampfner, "Right-Wing Populism Is Set to Sweep the West in 2024," *Foreign Policy*, December 26, 2023, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/26/right-wing-populism-are-set-to-sweep-the-west-in-2024/>.

⁵ Thomas Greven, "The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States: A Comparative Perspective" *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, May 2016, 2, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/12892.pdf>.

⁶ Alexander Hudson and Seema Shah, "Explainer: Populism - Left and Right, Progressive and Regressive," *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*, November 21, 2022, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://www.idea.int/blog/explainer-populism-left-and-right-progressive-and-regressive>.

⁷ Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij, "Do We Live in a 'Post-Truth' Era?" *Political Studies* 71, no. 2 (June 2023): 2, accessed January 6, 2025, doi:10.1177/00323217211026427.

⁸ Oxford Languages "Oxford Word of the Year 2016," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), accessed January 6, 2025, <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.

promises and sometimes propose overly simplistic solutions to complex problems. However, populist leaders bend the truth, often leading to distrust and a lack of trust in institutions.⁹

The situation worsens when they are caught lying; still, they rely on complex and convoluted justifications. Thus, this trust deficit prompted the public to believe in tempting lies, conspiracy theories, wild stories, and propaganda. Amidst prevailing uncertainty, it became difficult to believe in the facts.¹⁰ Language is used as a tool by populists to mold reality and bend the truth, which increases public anxieties and collective fears. In this way, the truth is manipulated to appeal to emotions and address their concerns.¹¹

Events like Brexit and the US presidential election 2016 reflected the use of popular themes to mobilize public appeals and emotions through social media campaigns, bypassing the facts.¹² These events show the existence of an intrusive relationship between populism and post-truth politics, just like an actor and an arena. Consider that Modi, as an actor, drastically relies on populist themes and rhetoric, massively sparking the debate of “Us Vs Them” to increase frustrations and use the element of nationalism to rise to power.¹³ Certainly, the arena is the digital media, through which he constantly misleads his audience or population using delusory and dubious statements.¹⁴ Even in the recent elections in 2024, he desperately used Hindu nationalism, ethnic divide, anti-Muslim hatred, and even the film industry for his political campaigns.¹⁵

The main research puzzle, which this study aims to explore, is how Modi still managed to win elections despite failing to fulfil his previous promises. In every election, he introduced new promises, agendas, and tactics, which enable him to secure victory. While existing literature discusses Modi's rise and his utilisation of right-wing populism, less emphasis has been placed on the methodology he employs, such as manipulation of information and the digital age. In each

⁹ Ward Van Zoonen, Vilma Luoma-aho, and Matias Lievonon, “Trust but verify? Examining the role of trust in institutions in the spread of unverified information on social media,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 150 (January 2024): 1, accessed January 6, 2025, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2023.107992.

¹⁰ Chi Luu, “The Collapse of Meaning in a Post-Truth World,” *JSTOR Daily*, December 21, 2016, accessed January, 26025, <https://daily.jstor.org/collapse-of-meaning-in-a-post-truth-world/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jonathan Rose, “Brexit, Trump, and Post-Truth Politics,” *Public Integrity* 19, no. 6 (April 2017): 2, accessed January 6, 2025, doi:10.1080/10999922.2017.1285540.

¹³ Nikita Sud, “The Actual Gujarat Model: Authoritarianism, Capitalism, Hindu Nationalism and Populism in the Time of Modi,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52, no. 1 (June 2020): 105, accessed January 6, 2025, doi:10.1080/00472336.2020.1846205.

¹⁴ Ibid, 116.

¹⁵ Sheikh Saalik, “As India's Election Nears, Some Bollywood Films Promote Modi Politics by Embracing Hindu Nationalism,” *AP News*, March 22, 2024, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/india-general-elections-2024-bollywood-modi-nationalism-2aea78fec4324d805d74ddc2bff9f633>.

election he relied on different tactics; for example, in 2014, he gained leverage through economic issues and Congress's failed policies, in 2019, he emphasized on the Balakot incident, and in 2024, anti-Muslim campaigns were executed via social media, the film industry, and the demolition of the Babri mosque. Thus, the main aim of this study is to analyse comparatively his techniques and methodology concerning the digital age, which remains the least discussed aspect. The manipulative use of digital media and the internet has jeopardised the traditional political system, leading to the collapse of meaning in a post-truth world, increasing anxiety and prompting many to embrace conspiracy theories.¹⁶

The paper utilizes qualitative methodology and primary data and secondary data in the form of official documents, statements, research papers, news, reports, and other open-source material to address the primary research question and fill the identified research gap. This research study utilizes descriptive, and explanatory tools to analyze the data.

The first section "*Deciphering Populist Tendencies and Post Truth*", discusses the integration of post-truth and populism in the contemporary political process, and specifically explores its role in reinvigorating Modi's popularity. The next section, "*Political Spectrum in the Age of Populism*", explores populism, right and left wing, and especially the spike that has been evident since the evolution of digital and information technologies. The next segment, "*Indian Political Environment and Populism in the Post-Truth Era*", examines the overall Indian political landscape since the 20th century, the rise of the right-wing nationalist movement, and the reasons behind this increase. The segment, "*Hindu Nationalism: A Prelude to Modi's Rise in India*", analyses the role of Hindutva and RSS ideology in fostering the growth of the BJP and their connections within the political system. This further emphasizes that Modi's rise to power capitalized on societal vulnerabilities, deepening divides such as Rich vs Poor, Hindus vs Muslims, and Secularists vs Hindu traditionalists, jingoistic policies—anchoring his leadership firmly within right-wing ideology. "*Modi's Political Resilience Amidst Political Setback: A Critical Appraisal*" explains the reasons behind his continued success despite political setbacks, focusing on the policies he previously criticised. However, his party is attempting to repair the damage by adopting alternative populist measures to regain public trust.

¹⁶ Ranjit Goswami, "India has been a post-truth society for years (and maybe the West has too)," *Ethical Journalism Network*, January 23, 2017, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/india-post-truth-society>.

Deciphering Populist Tendencies and Post-Truth

Since the beginning of the information age, digital media has played a crucial role in shaping the public narrative. Maintaining trust in institutions and traditional leaders has become increasingly difficult. By exploiting societal vulnerabilities, populist leaders have reshaped the political landscape, shifting democracies toward authoritarian regimes. Technology has played a significant role in disrupting the truth, leaving the political process behind bars, as there is no need to justify the news or even sources.¹⁷ It is totally up to the reader's and user's instinct to accept or reject the information presented. Thus, the fact does not matter anymore; people tend to believe based on their intuition and moods, and reality is always derailed in the process. That is why populist leaders frame particular news, events, or situations, and the public believes in distorted realities driven by emotions.

Populism emerges with the rise of democracy; it could be described as the shadow of it. One key feature of populism is the 'moralistic imagination of politics', a struggle between good and evil, where the people are portrayed as good, united and innocent, while the elite are depicted as corrupt, dishonest, and selfish.¹⁸ However, simply being anti-elite does not define populism; alongside anti-elitism, it also entails anti-pluralism.¹⁹ This often leads to a dichotomy of 'us vs them', with the people united against the elite, while disregarding diversity and differing opinions. Populists usually speak the language of democracy and claim, "let the people rule." Speaking in this way makes them appear relatable because they are seen as one of the people. But once in power, they tend to foster a 'liberal technocracy', threatening the democratic system.²⁰ Similarly, Modi exhibits comparable tendencies. Upon rising to power, he portrays himself as a man of the people, representing their will. However, he relied heavily on the digital media, manipulative use of the information age, to sway voters, and became a demagogue.

The confluence of media and disinformation became particularly evident during recent Indo-Pak military standoffs, especially following the Pahalgam incident. During the crises, the media landscape was dominated by extreme jingoism, rumour-mongering, fake news, and disinformation campaigns, all of which significantly harboured a deliberate 'information

¹⁷ Katharine Viner, "How Technology Disrupted the Truth," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth>.

¹⁸ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), PDF e-book, 19.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 11.

warfare.²¹ Thus, the emergence of the post-truth era greatly coincides with the rise of populism in global politics.²²

People want to hear, see and even believe in fascinating conspiracies created by populist leaders, and technology has provided access to manipulate those vulnerabilities of the target audience.²³ This allowed theories to propagate more speculatively and made people more skeptical about what to believe. Interestingly, leaders are striking through the internet and social media, making the public believe in theories and personifying populist penchants, blowing the traditional political processes.²⁴

For decades, innovations and transformations have captured the attention of policy and decision-makers. This is due to their ability to have a drastic impact on warfare. Analysts mention it as a changing character and the constant nature of war.²⁵ However, technologies have a similar impact on political systems. The digitalization and mediatization of politics have brought enormous changes to their modes. The rise in social media users, cyber-attacks, and propaganda against political opponents, along with growing divisions between social classes and groups, has enabled populist leaders to obscure realities and deepen divisions through xenophobia and fascist rhetoric. The future of politics seems to be based on manipulation, alteration of facts, propaganda, fake news, and deep fake. In war, it is used to break the enemy's will and morale until their ability to resist collapses.²⁶ However, in politics, it is a form of political engineering, where one seeks the public's attention and turns their support into a vote bank. The purpose lies in taking advantage of the opponent.²⁷ This is what the analysts refer to as the post-truth era.

²¹ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "How Social Media Lies Fuelled a Rush to War Between India and Pakistan," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2025, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/may/28/how-social-media-lies-fuelled-a-rush-to-war-between-india-and-pakistan>.

²² Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser et al., "Populism and the Media," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Luca Manucci (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 468.

²³ Viner, "How Technology Disrupted the Truth."

²⁴ Katherine L. Einstein and David M. Glick, "How exposure to conspiracy theories can reduce trust in government," *The London School of Economics and Political Science*, November 13, 2015, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2015/11/13/how-exposure-to-conspiracy-theories-can-reduce-trust-in-government/>.

²⁵ Antulio J. Echevarria, "War's Changing Character and Varying Nature: A Closer Look at Clausewitz's Trinity," *Infinity* 5, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 2, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/wars-changing-character-and-varying-nature-a-closer-look-at-clausewitzs-trinity/>.

²⁶ Darran Anderson, "The Grim Future of Urban Warfare," *The Atlantic*, December 11, 2018, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/12/technology-will-make-war-even-worse/577723/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

Rise of Populism in the Post-Truth Era: A Case Study of Modi's Regime

The term post-truth era for the first time was used by the Serbian American Steve Tesich in 1992.²⁸ In his article titled “A Government of Lies,” Tesich criticized the American government for continuously lying to the public, while the public chose to remain submissive. During the first Gulf War, the government emphasized press censorship, allegedly to prevent anti-regime campaigns. Steve criticized the Bush administration for putting the public behind the veil during the war, while the administration projected the measures into the public’s best interests.²⁹ Thus, the public was consciously living in a post-truth era, accepting lies and censorship that ostensibly served American interests. Then, the word resurfaced again in 2004 in the book *The Post Truth Era*, written by Ralph Keyes, where he referred to it as the “circumstance where objective facts have less influence over public opinion than appeals to the emotions and personal belief”, which is the post-truth.³⁰

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary selected this word as “word of the year”, due to events on both sides of the Atlantic, in the form of Nigel Farage in the UK and Donald Trump in the US, that began to shake democratic system.³¹ Analysts called it the most disastrous and the worst year in history due to social upheaval.³² Social instability, the impact of climate change, the storm in social media due to spikes in users, and lastly, the collapse of morality within societies due to the manipulation of facts and truths, fractured the collective anxieties of state societies.³³ People’s trust in public institutions—such as the government, police, and media—has been eroded, leading to institutional decay. An impasse arose due to a surge in an overwhelming amount of unbelievable fake news. Amidst uncertainty, the objective facts became less influential and malleable; the public’s trust in institutions is eroding, as they tend to believe what seems right to them and reject objective facts.³⁴

²⁸ Steve McGrath, “The ‘post-truth’ lie,” *Brodeur Partners*, December 2016, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://www.brodeur.com/post-truth-lie/>.

²⁹ Steve Tesich, “A Government of Lies,” *The Nation*, January 6, 1992, 13, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://archive.org/details/steve-tesich-government-of-lies-article/page/n1/mode/2up?view=theater>.

³⁰ Yael Brahms, “Philosophy of Post-Truth,” *The Institute for National Security Studies* 24, no. 2 (April 2021): accessed March 8, 2025, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/philosophy-of-post-truth/>.

³¹ Kreitner, “Post-Truth and Its Consequences.”

³² Luu, “The Collapse of Meaning in a Post-Truth World.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Seth Gabrielson, “The Post-truth Era: How Institutional Trust Evaporated Overnight,” *The Michigan Daily*, September 7, 2024, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.michigandaily.com/opinion/the-post-truth-era-how-institutional-trust-evaporated-overnight/>.

So, what gives rise to the uncertainty and instability on both sides of the Atlantic when the public no longer puts trust in public institutions? This was due to all the episodes the world witnessed in Britain and the United States. Trump in the US, being a right-wing populist leader, was able to get votes for the presidential office. While in Britain, people voted in favor of Brexit, believing in the promises of Nigel Farage during anti-EU campaigns.³⁵ Unbelievable fake news, propaganda, lies, and false promises successfully watered-down objective facts.

Similarly, despite Trump's dubious statements and claims, many of which were shockingly untrue, his use of political scoring, "alternative facts", and manipulation helped him gain public support and even win elections.³⁶ Thus, right-wing populism was at its peak, altering objective facts, and the line between truth and deception was far too blurred that it led to the post-truth era. Social media has a serious and perilous role in blurring the lines. Thus, it keeps influencing public opinions and altering their emotions.³⁷

The events in 2016 show the rise of right-wing populism in democracies, along with their reliance on social media to connect with the target audience. Thus, populism and the post-truth era have intertwining tendencies, reinforcing each other. However, populism will be further explained in detail in the upcoming section. But emotionally charged rhetoric and appeals, nationalism, religious extremism, and even setting fake news to mesmerize complex situations into simpler ones, are the ways used to compromise facts, which are generally the tools used by politicians in the post-truth era.³⁸ India is on top of the list, where the state party has been blatantly using tools to suppress freedom and disseminating a controlled narrative, thus justifying its legitimacy to consolidate its power.³⁹ Modi, famous for right-wing politics, has been in power for decades.⁴⁰ Rather than improving the lives of commoners, the fear of identity and security has been implanted

³⁵ "Nigel Farage labels £350m NHS promise 'a mistake'," *Good Morning Britain*, June 27, 2016, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.itv.com/goodmorningbritain/articles/nigel-farage-labels-350m-nhs-promise-a-mistake>.

³⁶ Mustafa Demir, "Populists International (I) - Populists Hand in Hand: Farage and Trump," *European Center for Populism Studies*, February 14, 2021, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.populismstudies.org/populists-international-i-populists-hand-in-hand-farage-and-trump/>.

³⁷ Alison Flood, "Post-truth' Named Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," *The Guardian*, November 15, 2016, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>.

³⁸ Brahms, "Philosophy of Post-Truth,".

³⁹ Amrita Singh, "The Chilling of the Fourth Estate After 10 Years of Modi," *Foreign Policy*, May 7, 2024, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/07/modi-media-journalists-freedom-press/>.

⁴⁰ Shireen Mushtaq, Faryal Mazari, and Sabira Ahsan, "Populism in India Under Modi Regime and its Implications for Pakistan," *NUST Journal of International Peace Stability* 7, no. 1 (2024): 35, accessed March 11, 2025, doi:10.37540/njips.v7i1.160.

into their minds.⁴¹ The introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) Bill 2019 is the perfect example of how Modi's BJP vandalizes minorities and is considered a source of threat to the rights of the majority of Indians. This assists him in winning the support of Hindus who are in majority.

Political Spectrum in the Age of Populism

As discussed earlier, the ultimate source of success for populist leaders lies in exploiting the anti-elite and anti-pluralist sentiments, while simultaneously using the democratic system as a façade to establish a liberal technocracy. These leaders then present themselves as uniquely chosen to perform sacred duties, claiming to be the only true representatives of “the actual people”. This is the core claim of populism: only those who support them are deemed legitimate. While the rest are labelled as outsiders, anti-nationalist, or even anti-state.⁴² A fitting example is Nigel Farage, who celebrated the Brexit victory, despite won by a narrow margin of 52% and opposing 48% were vilified as they were opponents of national interest.⁴³ The beauty of democracy lies in the existence of pluralistic ideas; however, the populist leader has a tendency to label opposition as a state enemy or even an enemy of public interest.

Thus, in the past few decades, populism has become a more successful political discourse in the liberal democratic world. Cursing the elites for corruption and unwise temptation seems to be an effective way to obtain good results in elections.⁴⁴ However, populism is not a new phenomenon, but the internet and social media have played a significant role in propagating popular themes, further adding speculations within societies. People's reliance on the arena, i.e., social media, shows their divergence of interest rather than reliance on traditional media. Social media has become a source of appeasement that appeals to their emotions. Everyone produces their own facts, which have consequences far beyond conventional journalism.⁴⁵ On the other hand, anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric is more commonly observed during elections, specifically in recent years.

Political entities exploit the vulnerability of societies and extrapolate anti-elite rhetoric through social media, as it has implicitly become the source of direct contact with people.

⁴¹ Ibid, 43.

⁴² Müller, What Is Populism? 20.

⁴³ Tesich, “A Government of Lies,” 12.

⁴⁴ “Populism and the Media,” 468.

⁴⁵ Viner, “How Technology Disrupted the Truth.”

Therefore, populism is a thin political ideology which ultimately separates society into two groups. The first one is homogenous; those are virtuous and positively characterised people. While the second group is antagonistically negatively connotated, those are the corrupt elites.⁴⁶ Thus, populism has three main objectives, including anti-elite, people's centrism, and claims of popular sovereignty.⁴⁷

Referring to its political context, populism has been categorized into right and left wings, respectively. Although both have similar audiences and common adversaries. However, they act on different grounds, such as right-wing populism or politics, are more nationalist or neo-nationalist. Certainly, left-wing politics is more social populism.⁴⁸ One more difference that categorizes their approaches is that right-wing populism is anti-elite or establishment. Their propaganda is based on selling the cards of minorities and immigrants, whom they call the reason behind every problem in society, primarily undermining the rights of the majority.⁴⁹ While left-wing populism is radical or even can be extremist, and a threat to democracy.⁵⁰ The difference lies in their approaches, in their way of mobilizing the public or propagating their agenda. Their mobilization is not pointed towards any specific group, immigrants, minorities, or socially marginalized people. Rather, their movement has a collective approach that includes everyone in a society irrespective of caste, creed, religion, and ethnicity. Such as Kemalism in Turkey or the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela.⁵¹ They adopt an egalitarian approach, swearing to protect minorities and socially marginalized groups.

Right-wing populism is also radical or extremist, but its themes include anti-globalization, nativism, nationalism, or based on protectionist policies. Thus, using the fear of minorities, immigrants, and ethnicities—they tend to be in opposition to the elite or establishment to win the support of the majority groups, for instance; anti-Islamization in Europe or Trump's vows during

⁴⁶ Luca Manucci and Edward Weber, "Why the Big Picture Matters: Political and Media Populism in Western Europe since the 1970s," *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 4 (2017): 316, doi:10.1111/spsr.12267.

⁴⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 148, accessed March 12, 2025, doi:10.1017/gov.2012.11.

⁴⁸ Jan-Werner Mueller, "What's Left of Left-Wing Populism?," *Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought*, February 13, 2019, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/praxis1313/jan-werner-mueller-whats-left-of-left-wing-populism/?cn-reloaded=1>.

⁴⁹ Hudson and Shah, "Explainer: Populism - Left and Right, Progressive and Regressive."

⁵⁰ Mueller, "What's Left of Left-Wing Populism?,"

⁵¹ "Left-Wing Populism," *European Center for Populism Studies*, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/left-wing-populism/>.

the 2016 presidential elections, which were to protect American society from the influx of immigrants.⁵² They literally are ethnocentric or even xenophobic; for them, identity and security are significantly important to keep their society, culture, or even the state from being invaded by outsiders.⁵³ These events heuristically endorse populism in the age of post-truth.

Both right and left-wing populism pose threats to liberal democracies. Such leaders are supposed to be elected through the democratic process, but choose to be authoritarian. In Europe and the US, recent trends show the rise of right-wing populism. The conservative and extremist parties are gaining momentum, having a common theme, fearmongering based on Islamophobic and xenophobic views.⁵⁴ On both sides of the Atlantic, leaders are using themes, i.e., anti-immigrants, protection of traditional values, and even anti-globalization.⁵⁵ However, in India, which is considered the world's largest democracy, right-wing parties have chosen to rely on similar themes in order to win the support of a large audience, which is Hindu majoritarian.

Modi consecutively, for the third time in a row, formed a government in the Center but with the assistance of coalition parties, which shows his thriving nature in the Indian political system, using populist rhetoric.⁵⁶ Throughout his political career, Modi has benefited significantly from emotionally charged, anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan narratives, effectively amplified through the Indian Godi media.⁵⁷ The media played a central role in reinforcing communal divisions, often portraying a stark contrast between Hindus and Muslims. This narrative was further supported by legislative initiatives with clear anti-Muslim undertones, such as the CAA of 2019, the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A.⁵⁸ These actions were not only politically strategic but also aimed at consolidating support from the Hindu majority by appealing to religious sentiments and fostering a sense of communal identity and appeasement. Similarly, this time the theme was the same as the previous ones, i.e., right-wing politics, but the methodology transformed and differed from the 2014 and 2019 elections.

⁵² Nolan D. McCaskill, "Trump promises wall and massive deportation program," *Politico*, August 31, 2016, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-immigration-address-arizona-227612>.

⁵³ "Right-Wing Populism."

⁵⁴ Mojta, "The Rising Tide of Right-Wing Populism Across the Globe."

⁵⁵ Luu, "The Collapse of Meaning in a Post-Truth World."

⁵⁶ "India's Narendra Modi Sworn in As Country's Prime Minister for a Third Term," *Al Jazeera*, June 9, 2024, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/9/indias-narendra-modi-sworn-in-as-countrys-prime-minister-for-a-third-term>.

⁵⁷ Mushtaq, Mazari, and Ahsan, "Populism in India Under Modi Regime and its Implications for Pakistan," 41.

⁵⁸ Mushtaq, Mazari, and Ahsan, "Populism in India Under Modi Regime and its Implications for Pakistan," 42.

The 2024 election witnessed an unsurprising shift, from economic bluffing in 2019 to an anti-Pakistan stance, and in this one, a further emphasis on Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim rhetoric, with the added use of the film industry as a tool.⁵⁹ For the first time, Bollywood was used to produce films that promoted his boldness and purposes, such as “Swatantra Veer Savarkar”, which was in the Indian theatres a few weeks before the national votes.⁶⁰ Thus, Narendra Modi cemented his power and harnessed nationalism by propagating Hindutva ideology among Indians. This will be further explained in detail in the upcoming section. But before discussing Modi’s method of harnessing power, this article will specifically look at the way historically Indian leaders in the past tried to mobilize Hindu nationalism rhetoric through the propagation of right-wing politics.

Indian Political Environment and Populism in the Post-Truth Era

Two elements greatly influence the current Indian political structure; the first is the M.D. Golwalkar’s teachings, in which his famous writings “We or Our Nationhood” are based on extremist and nationalist assumptions, portrayed Muslims and Christianity as hostile or disloyal to the state.⁶¹ Similarly, the demolition of the Babri masjid in 1992 turned out to be a major reason behind the rise of the BJP in the mainstream political structure alongside the Congress.⁶² In the 1980s, Indian politics underwent a significant transformation as Congress declined in prominence. This shift facilitated the RSS’s involvement in reforming the political landscape, paving the way for the BJP’s ascent. The fall was mainly due to the economic crisis, incompetence, and even the inability to resolve communal riots in India, which were on the rise during the 1980s.⁶³ It was for the first time in India after partition that right-wing political parties grabbed the public’s attention. Even during pre-partition times, Congress was a dominant party striving to rid itself of British rule. However, despite the formation of the RSS in 1925, its policies were not aligned with Gandhi’s or Nehru’s secularism policies.⁶⁴ Contrarily, they were against dividing India and aspired for Hindu

⁵⁹ Jessie Yeung and Rhea Mogul, “A ‘tidal change’ in Bollywood: How the world’s largest film industry veered to the right during the Modi era,” *CNN*, May 17, 2024, accessed March 14, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/17/style/india-elections-bollywood-modi-bjp-influence-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.

⁶⁰ SAALIQ, “As India’s Election Nears, Some Bollywood Films Promote Modi Politics by Embracing Hindu Nationalism.”

⁶¹ M. S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 2000), 52.

⁶² Zahid Hussain, “Rise of virulent nationalism,” *Dawn*, August 14, 2019, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1499428>.

⁶³ Mariam Fatima, Ghulam A. Murtaza, and Arshi S. Hashmi, “Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia,” *Margalla Papers*, 23, no. 2 (2019): 15, accessed March 15, 2025, 15-70.

⁶⁴ Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi, “Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia,” 3.

nationalist policies in India, where minorities would remain submissive to Hindutva ideology. The main objective of RSS was the centralization and even forceful interpretation of Hinduism in India. RSS even believed that the decentralization of Hinduism was the real reason behind the 1200-year-long Muslim rule in India. Thus, RSS was introduced to secure the identity and re-glorify Hinduism in the subcontinent.⁶⁵

The contradiction in policies between the RSS extremist group and the India National Congress (INC) led to the assassination of Gandhi in 1948. His pluralistic ideas and inclusive vision, which allowed followers of religions such as Christianity and Islam to practice their faiths peacefully, became one of the reasons for his assassination. Thus, his vision of a secular India, where people of all faiths could coexist, was tragically buried along with him. However, his vision fell short after his assassination by RSS party member Nathuram Godse.⁶⁶ RSS was entrenched in the philosophy of Hinduism and protectionism while considering Muslims and Christians -the aliens- as they were considered outsiders who were allegedly ruling in India and over Hindus for centuries.⁶⁷ Congress was largely accused of having an appeasement policy towards Muslims, specifically their notion that India belonged to every nation was rejected by their opposition. However, the BJP countered by propagating the concept of the two-nation theory, embedding themselves as the actual saviours of the Hindu religion and history.

Pragmatically, the propagation initially could not seize the support of Indians. But during the 1980s, when economic and other issues worsened and were intertwined with ethnonationalism, the BJP got an opportunity to rise in mainstream politics.⁶⁸ Thus, for the first time, the events assisted them in winning eighty-five seats at the Center. For four decades, Congress was the only ruling party in India, and their policies based on secular India were initially accepted among natives.⁶⁹ However, the transition was imminent after the drastic failure of Congress to deal with serious economic and other internal issues. This provided an opportunity for right-wing parties to reappear in Indian mainstream politics, thus leading to the propagation of Hinduism ideologues.

⁶⁵ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005), 13.

⁶⁶ Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi,

"Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia," 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁸ Anil Kumar Vajpayee, "Emergence of the BJP – Confusion Regarding Causes," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (1990): 492, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41855518>.

⁶⁹ "Overview of Indian Politics Since Independence, 1947-present," *NAU*, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/314HND01.htm>.

In the coming decades, Indian politics experienced a drastic shift. First, the decline of Congress in India due to its persistent failures. Second, the rise of regional parties such as the BJP in contrast to Congress. Third, the emergence of right-wing politics in India enabled Modi to come into power in 2014 by using Hindu rhetoric and populist sentiments. The ‘Made in India’ slogan was promoted to address economic issues along with anti-Muslim rhetoric narratives.⁷⁰ Thus, India witnessed a major shift in its political environment, giving rise to religious parties using rhetoric with a tendency to mobilize Hindu voters. Similarly, Hindu nationalists narrowed down the perception of a nation to its culture, using culture-specific terminologies, such as the prevailing ideas of Hindutva, to create India as a pure Hindu nation.⁷¹ However, Muslims were excluded from their culture as they fell short of fulfilling their criteria. Right-wing parties used a false sense of security to propagate the threat emanating from Muslims. Their loyalty was doubted, which allowed the government to reevaluate the appeasement policies and adopt the protectionist policies, thus excluding the Muslims. This all happened after their inclination toward extremism and radicalization, mixing religious sentiments with politics.⁷² The political rival of these nationalist parties believed that the phenomenon was to terrorize India using saffron and the authoritarian majoritarianism of right-wing Hindu parties.

Thus, it is obvious that the rise of right-wing parties resulted from Congress’s failure to deliver its promises, which even gave rise to the populist parties in India. The false sense of security and identity issues, which are the underlying rhetoric of right-wing parties, were used in nexus with the common issues using a hardline approach. Such parties blatantly exploit vulnerabilities that shattered the political environment within the state, quenching a more regressive stance against political opponents.

However, social media and the internet brought further speculations in Indian politics.⁷³ Modi’s BJP effectively utilized social media platforms as a key driver of its political campaigns, helping secure widespread public support. This contributed to a more polarized and complex Indian society, which continues to grapple with deep-rooted issues, particularly unemployment,

⁷⁰ Rajiv Kumar, “Reflections on the Dynamics of Party System,” in *Great Transition in India* (Delhi: University of Delhi, 2020), 175, https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/9789811222344_0009?rsltid=AfmBOoqTXB_R2pVSnsCWS3xMjZKCecIZaF9kLirSQgK_3ExFxBoX-ts1.

⁷¹ Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi, “Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia,” 3.

⁷² Ibid, 17.

⁷³ Mushtaq, Mazari, and Ahsan, “Populism in India Under Modi Regime and its Implications for Pakistan,” 40.

which remains a major challenge for the youth. Upon coming to power, Modi made sweeping promises, some of which were widely seen as unrealistic. While the ideological foundation of right-wing politics remained consistent, the methodology employed by the BJP evolved significantly. This shift was partly driven by the failure to address pressing economic issues, including the unmet promise of creating one million jobs per month.

The 2024 general elections, however, dealt a significant blow to Modi's political narrative, forcing a recalibration of his approach. Notably, he has started adopting policies he once dismissed, such as offering free electricity to farmers, a move that could place additional strain on the country's fiscal balance.⁷⁴ That is right-wing politics, mobilizing the voters using religious and nationalist sentiments, but in return, blowing up the whole system. This is further discussed in the upcoming section, the way he exploited religious differences for political gain cost him in the 2024 elections and forced him to take a defensive stance.

Hindu Nationalism: A Prelude to Modi's Rise in India

Initially, RSS was formulated to reanimate Hindutva and protect the Hindu ideologues. Thus, they needed a political party that allured their cause and ensured the execution of social and political goals. During the pre-partition era, RSS was introduced to counter the Khilafat Movement and even opposed Congress politics; and were particularly against the Independence Movement, which, according to their claims, was not part of their ambitions.⁷⁵ It is worth mentioning that Hinduism is not synonymous with the word Hindutva. Both are quite different; their context, interpretation, and even the purpose does not align. Hinduism is a religion or spiritual dogma, which every Hindu, no matter what side they belong to—center, left, or right, they are part of this religion.⁷⁶ Regarding Hindutva, it is the ideology of RSS first coined by V.D. Savarkar in 1923. Not every Hindu follower adopts this ideology, especially the intellectual and liberal classes deny the propagation of the extremist ideology and the right-wing approach. But to those with rightist leanings, RSS was able to propagate that Muslims are the source of a threat to their identity, and

⁷⁴ Krishna N. Das and Aftab Ahmed, "Modi's populism after India election reversal puts public finances at risk," *Reuters*, September 02, 2024, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/modis-populism-after-india-election-reversal-puts-public-finances-risk-2024-08-30/>.

⁷⁵ Jaffrelot, *The Sangh Parivar*, 1.

⁷⁶ A. G. Noorani, "What is Hindutva?," *DAWN*, December 10, 2016, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1301496>; Arvind Sharma, "On the Difference Between Hinduism and Hindutva," *Asian Philosophies and Religions* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 43, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/on-the-difference-between-hinduism-and-hindutva.pdf>.

that is why unification was necessary for survival.⁷⁷ It propagates Hindu nationalism and supremacy in the subcontinent and its premises. Also, it advocates the majoritarian Hindu rule, and proponents of “Hindu Rashtra”—protection of its culture and religions, etc.⁷⁸

The purpose of discussing Hindutva is to understand the significance of the BJP and RSS nexus in Indian politics. BJP is a right-wing political party promoting Hindutva and its teachings, which are even part of its election manifesto. The nexus is not new, however, RSS and BJP collaborated in 1996, and since then, this ideology has been sworn into their manifestos.⁷⁹ Analysts believe that Hindutva poses a serious threat to democracy and secularism in India, sworn to promote Hindu nationalism rather than Indian nationalism.⁸⁰ The tactic that maximises their power is the cultural reconstruction to unify and strengthen their common identity, transforming religion into a more unified and systematic way. Thus, cultural nationalism is the core of Modi’s campaign, which has been widely used since 2014. The purpose behind that is to unite the Hindus under one flag, using ‘saffron terrorists’ to win their support and the Lok Sabha elections.⁸¹ This was done having harsh stances against the Muslim and Christian populace, and even the absence of strong opposition allowed the BJP to morph into an authoritarian regime.

Modi successfully filled the power vacuum in Indian politics, as the Congress grew weaker, which is left-wing party committed to the idea of secular India. Through a staunch political campaign, Modi and his BJP managed to shift the public discourse towards an “us vs them” narrative, often framed under the radical and religious lines—Hindus vs Muslims. Throughout the campaign, he politicised Hinduism, in nexus with domestic issues, i.e., economy. This polarised Indian society, introducing new complexities and fueling radicalization, dynamics that ultimately bolstered his political career and helped secure his victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.⁸² RSS and BJP have always been credited for three things—first the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, second, the Gujrat incident under the leadership of Modi, third, the revival of Golwalkar’s and his teachings on “We or Our Nationhood Defined,” which totally reflects fascism

⁷⁷ Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi, “Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia,” 21.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 25.

⁷⁹ Noorani, “What is Hindutva.”

⁸⁰ Amit Singh, “Hindutva Fascism Threatens the World’s Largest Democracy,” *The Loop*, October 31, 2022, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/hindutva-fascism-is-threatening-the-worlds-largest-democracy/>.

⁸¹ Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi, “Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia,” 9.

⁸² Ibid, 10.

aspired through Hitler's Nazism in Germany, Casteism and Islamophobia.⁸³ Throughout his campaign, he used religious vulnerabilities, embedded with identity threats and was able to win the support of Hindu majoritarians.

The second most important factor that helped him win the elections is the mediatization of politics. That is the tendency of populist leaders to attract public attention using blurred, half messages, and even an emotional tone and simplistic content through digital platforms, while continuously undermining the facts.⁸⁴ Mediatization is the convergence of political and media logic, in which populist leaders grab the attention of viewers, while the media increase their viewership. Thus, it is a direct relationship; both entities are beneficiaries in terms of commercialization and politicization.⁸⁵ Conversely, parties that continue to rely on traditional political processes have lost ground, a weakness that has cost them significantly during elections. In the presence of a weak opposition and increasingly controlled media networks, the Modi regime has successfully brought many major media houses under its influence. As a result, mainstream media tends to remain uncritical of Modi's policies, often targeting the opposition and minority groups while remaining silent on pressing national issues. For instance, the 2023 Manipur crisis, marked by violent ethnic clashes, exposed the government's failure to act decisively, yet received minimal critical coverage from mainstream outlets.⁸⁶ The Godi media is exceptional in covering the lies and failures of Modi's regime; it only broadcasts "Mann ki bat", things which he likes and which favour his regime.⁸⁷ Therefore, logic and rationality always suffer and even derail during the mediatization.

The South Asian region is renowned for conflict between two major nuclear powers and is often embroiled in cross-border conflicts between India and Pakistan. In this environment, the role of media is extremely significant; it serves as the primary source during times of crisis and heightened tensions.⁸⁸ News broadcasting and information circulation can easily alter public perception. In India, the number of people with access to TV in homes has increased from 830

⁸³ Shamsul Islam, "Golwalkar's We or Our Nationhood Defined: A Critique," *Academia*, 2006, accessed March 16, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/6765111/Golwalkar_s_We_or_Our_Nationhood_Defined_A_Critique.

⁸⁴ "Populism and the Media," 468.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 469.

⁸⁶ Amrita Singh, "The Chilling of the Fourth Estate After 10 Years of Modi," *Foreign Policy*, May 7, 2024, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/07/modi-media-journalists-freedom-press/>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸⁸ Dr. Asma Shakir Khawaja and Shumaila Zahoor, "Indian Media: Feeding the War Hysteria or a Peace Dividend?," *NDU Journal* 34 (2020): 148, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://ndujournal.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/71/56>.

million in 2016 to 890 million in 2020.⁸⁹ Additionally, there are 900 private TV channels, half of which are dedicated to news broadcasts.⁹⁰ Similarly, 465 million people have access to internet services, making India a leader in broadcasting infrastructure worldwide.⁹¹

With such a vast population accessing information technologies, it has also become a breeding ground for disinformation, fake news, and rumour bombs.⁹² Modi's BJP has reportedly controlled news channels, utilising emotionally charged rhetoric and hyper-nationalist narratives that are disseminated among the public.⁹³ The use of digital media as a vehicle for disinformation campaigns, fake news, and jingoistic narratives against Pakistan is quite evident, especially during the Uri attacks in 2016, the Pulwama crisis, and the post-Pahalgam incidents. Mentioning the post-Pahalgam incidents, which led to the most dangerous confrontation of the decade, the Indian media launched its own war, which analysts referred to as 'a deliberate disinformation war'.⁹⁴ The "Godi Media" resembles a platform for jingoistic rhetoric and anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim narratives, creatively serving to provide political cover for the Indian leadership. This highlights the effective use of media in the age of post-truth, employing populist and ultra-nationalist rhetoric.

This is how the media has been utilized for Modi's political advantage, undermining facts and neglecting rationality, blatantly misleading the public through unnecessary and dubious statements, and targeting the opposition and minorities.⁹⁵ Independent analysis shows that under Modi's regime, the media willingly serves the Hindu nationalists and the BJP's policies, and that is why the word "Godi Media" has been widely used.⁹⁶ But the dreadful thing is that the public seems to believe such dubious statements. The post-Pulwama and Pahalgam periods are the best examples of the initiation of deliberate disinformation campaigns, creating a war-jingoistic environment, and attempting to capitalise on the opportunity in the form of a vote bank. Modi, back in 2014, promised that he would reform the economy, provide one million jobs under the

⁸⁹ Tanushree Basuroy, *Number of Indians with access to television as of 2020, by age group (in millions)*, (STATISTA, 2023).

⁹⁰ "India profile-Media," World South Asia, *BBC News*, April 29, 2019, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12557390>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Hammad Sarfraz, "India's use of misinformation debunked," *Express Tribune*, September 26, 2021, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2322010/indias-use-of-misinformation-debunked>.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Michael Kugelman, "Why Disinformation Surged During the India-Pakistan Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2025, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/14/india-pakistan-crisis-disinformation-media/>.

⁹⁵ Ravish Kumar, "India's Media – Captured and Censored," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2024, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-india-report/2024/3/28/indias-media-captured-and-censored>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

“Made in India” narrative.⁹⁷ Failure to comply with promises forced him to change the underlying themes to anti-Pakistan in 2019. Thus, he continued to rely on populist narratives. Turning the tables through the use of media and controlled narratives, lambasting Pakistan while mining the tensions between the two states, was a disproportionate political stunt.⁹⁸ Even though India lost tactically, it was able to convert the propaganda and false narratives into political scoring. A large number of the Hindu population believed that Modi taught a real lesson to Pakistan; thus, the BJP's stunt satisfied the majority of Hindu nationalists.⁹⁹ This assisted him in winning elections with even greater margins. Most analysts believed that the mandate in the 2019 elections was a referendum on Modi's nationalist Hindutva policies.¹⁰⁰

Therefore, in the upcoming years, Modi's Hindutva policies took a harsh turn. Revoking articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution regarding Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) and then CAA—reforms to declare Muslims, illegal settlers who were residents for centuries.¹⁰¹ These events have sparked controversy and exposed his ambition to use alternative means to appease Hindu majoritarianism, socially marginalizing minorities. Therefore, it is obvious that Modi's overwhelming usage of media to launch propaganda campaigns against minorities, suppressing their rights, assisted him in consolidating his power. On the other hand, even members of the opposition party were arrested, for instance, Rahul Gandhi was arrested in a defamation case and sentenced for making strong remarks against Modi.¹⁰² Thus, no one could be safe from Modi's aggressive campaigns to win the hearts and minds of the Hindu population.

Modi's Political Resilience Amidst Political Setback: A Critical Appraisal

The fall of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany shows that a cult built on propaganda, lies, and populist rhetoric to mobilise nationalistic fervour is likely to encounter public wrath.¹⁰³ These

⁹⁷ Maria A. Habib, “After India Loses Dogfight to Pakistan, Questions Arise About Its ‘Vintage’ Military,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 2019, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/03/world/asia/india-military-united-states-china.html>.

⁹⁸ Soutik Biswas, “‘War’ and India PM Modi's Muscular Strongman Image,” *BBC*, March 6, 2019, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47439101>.

⁹⁹ Soutik Biswas, “Narendra Modi V Imran Khan: Who Won the War of Perception?,” *BBC*, March 1, 2019, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47414490>.

¹⁰⁰ Soutik Biswas, “India Election Results 2019: Narendra Modi Secures Landslide Win,” *BBC*, May 23, 2019, accessed March 17, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48347081>.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Benjamin Soloway, “Did the Brutal Death of Mussolini Contribute to Hitler's Suicide?,” *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2015, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/28/did-the-brutal-death-of-mussolini-contribute-to-hitlers-suicide/>.

are extreme examples in which these leaders had to face harsh circumstances in response to what they had done with their populations. Similarly, Modi can be exemplified in this, considering himself a “man sent by God,” following his interview just before the elections, to portray himself as the righteous of all.¹⁰⁴ Certainly, despite failures in governance and worsening conditions for the public, Modi’s political bluffs and continuous emphasis on domestic flaws have sustained his influence. Though he fell short of securing a simple majority of 272 seats in the last elections. Still, he thrived and amid a staunch campaign, he managed to secure seats, continued to dominate Indian politics, and formed a coalition government to claim premiership for the third consecutive time.¹⁰⁵

However, the post-2019 era was full of failure and constant devastation; the population faced severe circumstances during COVID-19. It was even declared the second most affected state due to the pandemic, and the death toll was around 1.15 million.¹⁰⁶ The actual number was even higher, according to international media and organizations. The reason behind the increasing number of deaths includes discrimination based on caste, religion, and gender, harsh and severe lockdowns, and even a lack of proper health facilities. To avoid criticism, the government asked X (formerly Twitter) and other media blogging websites to filter the anti-government tweets and posts.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, the media houses were quiet in severe situations, and only controlled narratives and news were broadcasted. Freedom House 2021 report stated that authorities even filed criminal charges against citizens, journalists, students, and health workers who criticized the government for failing to control the pandemic, under the colonial era sedition law acts and the IT Act 2000.¹⁰⁸

In Modi’s “New India,” the press has become more dependent on the government, rather than operating independently and criticizing his policies. No matter what happens, the media is supposed to remain quiet and support the agenda. Modi hates being questioned and even hates it

¹⁰⁴ Sangeeta B. Pisharoty, “By Ascribing Divinity Unto Himself, Modi Emulates None Other Than Hitler,” *The Wire*, May 24, 2024, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://thewire.in/politics/by-ascribing-divinity-unto-himself-modi-emulates-none-other-than-hitler>.

¹⁰⁵ Soutik Biswas, “India Election 2024: Why Modi Failed to Win Outright Majority,” *BBC*, June 4, 2024, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c977g8gl5q2o>.

¹⁰⁶ Yashraj Sharma, “India’s Hidden COVID Deaths: Was the Toll in 2020 Eight Times Higher?,” *Al Jazeera*, July 20, 2024, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/20/did-covids-first-wave-kill-eight-times-more-indians-than-announced>.

¹⁰⁷ “India Covid: Anger as Twitter Ordered to Remove Critical Virus Posts,” *BBC*, April 26, 2021, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56883483>.

¹⁰⁸ India: Freedom in the World 2021, (Washington D.C.: Freedom House, 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021>.

when the media tries to challenge his narratives.¹⁰⁹ That is why he and even members of the BJP never answer the questions of the media. Similarly, fake news, lies, rumour bombs, propaganda, lies, and even disinformation campaigns are the ways Indian media relies on to alter the truth and facts. Criticism is almost nonexistent; whoever does so have to face charges. Even Rahul Gandhi had to face charges for making defamatory remarks about Modi.¹¹⁰ Under Modi's regime, not only did Muslims have to suffer, but Christians had to face violence, especially in Manipur, which is among the examples of state-backed violence against minorities.¹¹¹ His policies, especially those of marginalizing Muslim populations and even the fear of constitutional amendments that will totally alienate the poor from society, have resulted in a reverse gear to his popularity. Moreover, the inability to address the economic issues unbelievably vowed during the 2014 elections regarding employment opportunities, is still an issue the populace is facing.¹¹²

After 2024 election his popularity took a noticeable hit, and he had to face significant backlash. This forced him to resort to traditional tactics to mask his incompetence in handling economic-related issues. For instance, recently his coalition parties started to distribute cash handouts, free electricity to farmers, and even debt waivers, although he previously criticized these policies.¹¹³ Analysts warned that these policies could further strain the fiscal balances, pushing the state towards serious economic challenges. Thus, for short-term gains, a long-term debacle is awaiting. Modi has lost his credibility and firm grip in Indian politics, Maya Tudor believes that "in the heart of Hindu land, despite a large number of his voters, Modi could not convert the large Hindu population into his vote bank, thus it is a moral and political loss for the BJP."¹¹⁴

Therefore, despite his policies and his autocratic way of governing the largest democracy in the world, he still managed to form the government in the 2024 elections. This shows his political mantra and skillfully using propaganda, populist rhetoric, and even controlled media, his

¹⁰⁹ Sanjay Kumar, "Press in Chains: Fear and Trolling in Modi's 'new India'," *DAWN*, February 10, 2022, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1673816>.

¹¹⁰ Krishnadas Rajagopal, "Supreme Court Stays Rahul Gandhi's Conviction in 'Modi Surname' Remark Criminal Defamation Case," *The Hindu*, August 4, 2023, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sc-stays-rahul-gandhis-conviction-in-modi-surname-remark-criminal-defamation-case/article67157567.ece>.

¹¹¹ "India: Freedom in the World 2021."

¹¹² Biswas, "India Election 2024: Why Modi Failed to Win Outright Majority."

¹¹³ Das and Ahmed, "Modi's populism after India election reversal puts public finances at risk."

¹¹⁴ Hannah E. Petersen, "Modi Loses Parliamentary Majority in Indian Election," *The Guardian*, June 5, 2024, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/04/india-election-results-narendra-modi-bjp>.

ambition of turning India into a Hindu nationalist nation. Swiftly turning the narrative in his favor, with staunch social media and digital campaigns, Modi was able to claim victory in the elections. This shows that his populist themes are still working in manipulating the Indian political structure with more transformative techniques.

Conclusion

Following the recent elections, Modi's party has shifted gears and reverted to conventional politics—an approach he often criticised. The purpose was to gain the lost ground through unequivocal promises. Similarly, his politics is around winning the support of Hindu voters and pundits using nationalist and Hindutva rhetoric. One of the main aspects of his staunch campaign is using digital media for information control and propagation of populist rhetoric. Similarly, in his previous campaign, fear of losing the voters, Modi's focus shifted to winning the trust of Hindu voters. For this, he designed narratives, promoted movies that upsurged Hinduism, promoted anti-Muslim narratives and even took the initiative to win the support of Hindu pundits, such as the construction of the Ayodhya Temple in Uttar Pradesh. This allowed him to cover up his failure and the promises he made during previous elections, such as economic reforms, employment opportunities, etc. Despite facing serious economic issues during his reign, he was reelected, which shows his success in manipulating the Indian political system using populist themes and narratives in the age of post-truth. The post-truth era exposes human biases and their beliefs on emotions rather than logic and facts. Even cultures with strong practices surrender in front of technology. Though he failed to comply with promises, huge numbers of Hindu voters still believe in his unbelievable fake promise, which he designed to attract the masses. Economic issues, such as unemployment, are still out there, the rich-poor distinction has further increased the gap, and despite the controversial constitutional amendments, his party is thriving. The article concludes the case study of Modi's constantly shifting themes to maintain dominance in Indian politics. However, media houses and the internet have largely favoured him, playing a manipulative and excessive role in the political system. Meanwhile, issues such as unemployment, healthcare, and other fundamental problems continue to plague many, especially middle-class Indians.