

Essay

RISE OF MODI'S TECH-POPULISM IN INDIA

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Populism remains a vaguely defined concept having porous boundaries though widely mentioned as a terminology in the literature. It is often associated with democracy; however, the theorists mainly depend on a specific political context to describe populism (Mouzelis, 1985; Taguieff, 1995). This context carries such features as the distasteful involvement of a highly emotional but simple political rhetoric and opportunistic policies aimed to seek votes only (Mudde, 2004), and most importantly a dominant leader (Taggart, 2000). The political scenario of the 21st century is full of all these characteristics and the populist wave is today more versatile and stronger than ever. Among other political leaders, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a distinctive figure who actively engaged the new media technologies to mediatize his version of populism in a developing country like India. With this, Modi has successfully engraved a tech-savvy image of himself to publicize his motto of "Modi-fied India". Social media networks, particularly Twitter, have not only helped him reach out to his followers but also served as a medium to connect him to mainstream media. These platforms have been valuable for him to reshape his public image and align himself with the aspirations of a modern India as its leader (Pal, 2015). This article is an attempt to explain how Narendra Modi's political campaign carried the features of populism

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and how new media technologies and social media networks facilitated him to popularize his political rhetoric.

The excessive use of modern technologies during Modi's election campaign was termed by Jaffrelot (2015) as "high-tech populism". While examining his election campaign, Mahurkar & Pradhan (2014) found that Modi's dedicated voter-mobilizers directly focused on 155 urban constituencies which were identified as the digital seats of the Indian parliament due to the extraordinary use of social media networks by the voters residing in these areas. The educated upper middle class of these areas were mobilized but scattered, and the charismatic leadership of Narendra Modi put them all together to promote his populist wave. The presence of a charismatic leader who has a personalized connection with the public, which was provided by social media networks in this case, is a key ingredient of populism (Di Tella, 1997).

Narendra Modi and the core team of his campaigners started making direct communication with common people even before 2012, the year when Modi expressed his clear intention to run for the office of the prime minister for the first time. For this, Modi and his team overcame the need for mainstream media by relying on social media. He joined almost every available social media network in 2009 and removed the media constraint between himself and the public, while no other political leader realized it. This way, Modi established an individualized hegemony with almost no other challenger on this platform, eventually becoming a political brand (Sinha, 2017).

As Di Tella (1965) noted that populism gained its strength through the engagement of educated urban class, the assistance of a highly well-equipped team was acquired to bring about the revolution of such a tech-filled populism in India. Mahurkar and Pradhan (2014) stated that Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) engaged a team of well-trained IT professionals to execute their election campaign, in addition to the volunteers pledging their personal affiliation to BJP's political cause. However, before it became something really professionally organized in 2014, a digital campaign named "Shining India" was carried out through websites, text messages and emails. In 2007, via a newly established IT cell, the BJP started using social media networks for the collection of electoral data and reputation management (Shukla, 2014). Afterwards, as this cell transformed into an election campaign tool in 2013, the Citizens for Accountable Governance (CAG) drive was launched to build a highly dense network of voter-mobilizers. The election campaign team was given names such as "Modi for PM" and

“Mission 272”, the number of seats required to gain majority in the Indian Parliament known as Lok Sabha (Mahurkar and Pradhan 2014).

The use of 3D hologram technology not only made it possible to spread Modi’s message everywhere but also became a fascinating experience for the low-educated public in the under-developed regions of the country. Moreover, Modi addressed lots of allies being taken out on the mountains of Himalaya, in the plains of Punjab, small towns of Himachal Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh using this technology. Nelson (2014) reported that BJP arranged more than a thousand such technology-assisted gatherings during the election campaign. The citizens not only listened to Modi in great awe but were also impressed by this great magic of technology. Likewise, in order to directly interact with voters, Modi also used Google’s Hangout feature which allowed them to post written and audio-visual questions, providing them a never-before-enjoyed experience of encountering with a prime ministerial candidate (Shetty, 2012). He had also launched the #SelfieWithModi campaign to invite individuals for active political participation during the elections (Shekhar, 2014). This provided a multi-level personalized communication between the populist leader and the public.

Di Tella (1965) emphasized that mass media paves the way to raise the aspirations of the audience by facilitating populist movements and that the effect is more visible in towns and among the educated class. Modi’s team also had a realization that traditional media was equally important for the elections. They knew that any debate on social media platforms had the power to drive the mainstream media. To appear on social media as well as traditional news sources, they made it possible to live broadcast every speech of Narendra Modi on a dedicated web TV named YuvaiTV. The video stream from this web TV was immediately trimmed into short video clips and tweeted as a live event to the public (Jaffrelot, 2015). This quick action, while on the one hand, occupied debate on social media platforms, it also caught the attention of conventional media. As a result, Modi got 33.2% to 40% time on news channels during the election campaign while Aam Admi Party’s (AAP) Arvind Kejriwal received 10.31%, and the Congress Party’s Rahul Gandhi received only 4.33% of coverage (Rukmini, 2016). This is exactly what Di Tella (1965) called mass media’s “revolution of rising expectations”.

For a powerful and successful populist political movement, the rhetoric must be shaped and reshaped by one single populist leader (Taggart, 2000). The new media tools provided Narendra Modi with this “individualized” feature when his party’s

(Bhartiya Janta Party or BJP) campaign largely dominated the 2014 general elections with one single name: Narendra Modi. While he actively commented on policies and interacted with his followers through social media by replying and retweeting, the mark of individualism was also visible in the slogans: “Har har Modi (everyone is Modi)”, “har ghar Modi (Modi is in every home)” and “Abb ki bar, Modi Sarkar (now is time Modi’s rule)”. He was convincing the voters by saying “every vote cast to BJP candidate is actually a vote to me”, the press and the whole political public sphere of the Indian election were discussing the characteristics of only one person: Narendra Modi. Even BJP’s other top leaders such as LK Advani, Jaswant Singh, Harin Pathak, MM Joshi, and Rajnath Singh were either forced into silence in the shade of Modi’s “doer” profile or they had to find safe constituencies to ensure their election would win (Joshi, 2014).

Individualism, excessive communication with voters and application of modern-day tools might not have won the elections for Modi, if the important ingredient of populism known as public resentment against the system were missing in India. As it is believed that wherever there’s a public sentiment of resentment against the established order, it gives rise to populism (Shills, 1956; Di Tella, 1965).

Mudde (2016) rationalized that two homogeneous but opposing groups representing “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” were the most essential feature of populism. Modi also relied on an anti-elite tirade of populism for strengthening his relationship with people and showing them that he was one of them. While he called the then Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh as Maun Mohan Singh, suggesting that Singh remained silent and did nothing for the people (Maun means silent in the local language of India), he called himself the guard of the public money at a public rally in 2012. He further added that he had no near-ones or dear-ones, as people of Gujarat and India were his only family (“Narendra Modi calls PM ‘maun’ Mohan Singh,” 2012). Jaffrelot & Martelli (2017) examined the Independence Day speeches of Narendra Modi and found that “sister”, “brother”, and “team” were the most-used words, once again conveying the meanings of being part of an Indian common man’s family.

During the election campaign, Modi always pitched himself as an outsider of Delhi-club, as Khaleej Times noted (“From tea boy to prime minister: India Modi-fied,” 2014), and he frequently retweeted the content harshly criticizing the established political elite and mentioned his experience of working at a tea stall as a child, giving the impression that he was one of the common and the poor Indians braving harsh

times (Schroeder, 2018). A politician from his opponent Congress Party once tried to insult him by calling him a “chaiwala” or teaboy referring to his profession as a child, but Modi used the same taunt to build a “one-of-us” public image for himself, exemplifying the “oppositionalism” characteristic of populism (Shills, 1962). After this incident, Modi’s political party started the tradition of “chai pe charcha”, literally meaning “debate at tea”, where the prime ministerial candidate would visit tea stalls in different parts of the country and interact with common citizens. All these activities were also broadcast through satellite services and social media platforms. According to a report, one of such interactions was displayed at 1,000 tea stall locations across 300 Indian cities (Press Trust of India, 2012). The “us vs. them” notion is a powerful feature of populist campaigns to attract popular votes (Taggart, 2000), and Narendra Modi declared the Gandhi-Nehru family as part of the Delhi establishment and political dynasty who would never let any common Indian become a political leader. He used both traditional and new media platforms to spread this notion (Mishra, 2018).

Modi also put “ostracizing the others” tool of populism in action by creating a new enemy within the population by siding with right-wing Hindus and leaving lesser space to minorities like Muslims. This is a reshaped representation of the “us vs. them” notion where “them” is a homogenous group of people considered inferior to “us” within the population (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Benefitting from his past association with right-wing Hindu movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which also influences the political ideology of the BJP, Modi also wooed the Hindu population. He regularly portrayed Hindu religious symbols in his tweets, mentioned Hindu religious references in public speeches, visited renowned Hindu personalities such as Baba Ramdev and Swami Adityanath, and posted pictures of such meetings on his social media accounts during the election days (Pande, 2014). The increased promotion of Hindutva by a political leader with the stature of Narendra Modi resulted in religious debates on media such as the protection of cows, the animal considered the most sacred in Hinduism, and BJP even went on to table a new law for the citizenship of Hindus and other religious segments, except Muslims, in the parliament to fulfill the electoral promise to make India a home to Hindus persecuted in any other part of the world (Medha, 2016). Furthermore, supporting the rhetoric that populist rulers not only require internal antagonists but also external enemies to gain the nationalist support to

hold control of the affairs (Naim, 2017), Modi also exploited anti-Pakistan¹ sentiment among the public.

After rising to the office of the prime minister, Modi's social media usage set its voyage into a new direction: showing public the picture of a new India. Moreover, to show the common Indians that the Prime Minister of "Modi-fied" India gets an equal and friendly treatment at the world level, Narendra Modi has been regularly posting selfies while hugging the leaders of other nations such as the United States, Japan, China, and France. He also engages with other leaders on Twitter by exchanging tweets and retweets, providing the public with a chance to directly observe such high-level communication (Sinha, 2017). The Indian premier also uses social media platforms to run several awareness campaigns related to cleanliness, girls' education, poverty elevation and building a positive global image of India (Pasricha, 2015). Pal (2015) noted that most of Modi's tweets after the 2014 election were repetitions of good-will shout-outs, feel-better messages, and displays of global partnerships and engagements. This has all been a showoff for "Modi-fied India".

Even after spending almost five years in the office, the Indian prime minister still runs "Mann Ki Baat (Talk by heart)" monthly radio speech, which is also broadcast on social media, where he urges every common Indian to give feedback by means of direct communication. Making social media's perception of one-on-one communication real in 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi even sent out a personalized SMS to almost 2 million personnel of police and paramilitary service on the occasion of India's Republic Day (Press Trust of India, 2016).

Today, Narendra Modi is acknowledged as the most popular world leader on social networking platforms Instagram and Facebook ("PM Modi most followed world leader on Instagram," 2018). On Twitter, however, he remains overshadowed by US President Donald Trump (Singh, 2018). On the other hand, once again proving himself a man ahead of his time, Narendra Modi started a campaign for his reelection almost one

¹ In 2016 India claimed to have conducted a military surgical strike on the Pakistani side of disputed Kashmir region sparking a major brawl on traditional as well as social media networks in India and Pakistan. While Pakistan denied any such operation, the keywords like "Modi punishes Pak" and "India strikes Pak" became the most-discussed topics on social media networks in India. Following such a claim and public debate on social media, even the opposition politicians were forced to back the government of Narendra Modi. The Indian government also boycotted Pakistan on several regional and global forums such as SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) and suspended the bilateral dialogue on matters including trade and terrorism.

year before the potential date of election. This time a personalized mobile phone application (NaMo App) has been launched for the public and the Indian prime minister is using it both for publicizing his successes and engaging with his followers. In April and May 2018 alone, he conducted 5 video interactions through this app. The lead members of Modi's election team even stated to the press that "if 2014 was a social media election, 2019 [election] would be an app election", also adding that all of the video interactions through the mobile app are also live-streamed on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Purkayastha, 2018).

The observations suggest that new media technologies have provided populist politicians like Narendra Modi with tools that guarantee their success in democracies, marking the return of populism in India. In the United States, Donald Trump used Twitter to dominate the mainstream media debate which was becoming the Republican presidential campaign, and eventually the President of the US. Like Modi, Trump is also driving an anti-elite agenda which also includes ostracizing others. The new media tools and social media platforms enable the politicians to demonstrate their populist ideas to the people directly; however, the complex relationship between these networks and their political uses has evolved over time. The efforts are underway to improve the algorithms of the networks as well the digital media literacy among the users. However, certain quarters of the population still continue to be vulnerable to the uncontrolled flood of information on the internet, and it is likely that the upcoming years might manifest an intense pattern of social media network usage to mediate populism.

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