Narendra Modi and the New Politics of Hybrid Populism

The political project built by Narendra Modi and Bharatiya Janata Party is best understood as a form of hybrid populism. As the brand suggests, it does not solely satisfy under one register alone. Instead, it complements a combination of rather differing features. To expand, it combines a personalized leader cult, Hindu majoritarian nationalism, and highly visible welfare delivery into a single political narrative in which Modi emerges as the direct manifestation of the Indian people, the Indian nation of Bharat, and the developmental state itself. This embodiment provides justification why the Modi led BJP remained steadfast in power for three long terms. Specifically it helps explain why Modi remained strong enough to win a third term in 2024 even after the BJP lost its single party majority. In the 2024 elections, the party won 240 Lok Sabha seats, while the broader National Democratic Alliance retained a parliamentary majority. However, this very hybrid model has also produced rather mounting concerns about democratic costs. The V-Dem Institute listed India among the ten top stand alone autocracies, ranking it fourth by magnitude of decline on its Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Similarly, the Freedom House rated India “Partly Free” in 2025 with a score of 63 out of 100 (Freedom House, 2025). Taken together, Modi’s hybrid populism shows how electoral dominance can be sustained through the incorporation of nationalist identity, welfare delivery, and leader centered politics, even as democratic institutions face growing pressure.

Therefore, Modi is especially detrimental to the study of populism, solely because he does not neatly fit into a simple left wing or right wing box. Modi’s politics includes right wing populism, in which the Hindu majority is cast as the “real people” threatened by the minorities, mainly the Muslims, secular critics, and entrenched elites. It also incorporates left wing

populism, specifically a pro poor welfare populism that presents the prime minister as the direct benefactor of ordinary citizens. This paper hence brings forth the argument that Modi's durability comes from this very fusion. However, the same fusion is also erosive. It weakens pluralism, personalizes institutions, and narrows the scope of citizenship. Most importantly, it replaces real reforms with highly visible schemes and symbolic gestures, while deeper problems like unemployment, inequality, and weak accountability remain unresolved.

This paper therefore proposes the following research question: to what extent is Narendra Modi's continued electoral dominance explained through the framework of hybrid populism, and what are the democratic consequences of this political model in contemporary India. Hence, this argues that Narendra Modi's political project is best understood as a form of hybrid populism that combines personalist leadership, Hindu Majoritarian nationalism, and welfare based redistribution into a single political strategy. While this fusion has proven to be electorally durable, it simultaneously reshapes democratic institutions by centralizing authority, narrowing pluralism, and producing a system of unequal political competition.

To demonstrate this, the paper firstly examines how personalist leadership transforms party structures and political authority, before analyzing how welfare delivery strengthens mass support while reinforcing leader centered legitimacy. It then explores how Hindutva redefines the boundaries of citizenship and "the people," followed by an assessment of the economic limits of this model. Finally, it evaluates the post 2024 election political landscape to show how these dynamics have produced a more durable yet increasingly uneven democratic order. Hence, explaining how the system works, why it is successful and why it is dangerous.

Personalist populism and party transformation

This section strives to establish an argument that Modi's personalist style does not necessarily replace populism in the classical sense defined by those of the likes of Cas Mudde. Instead, however, it intensifies the classical definition by turning the abstract "will of the people" into the embodied authority of a single leader. Therefore, Modi's personalist populism did change the BJP from a collective party organization into a leader centered political instrument, reshaping both electoral politics as well as democratic institutions in India.

On that very note, Cas Mudde decades ago defined populism as a "thin centered ideology" that firstly separates society into antagonistic and homogeneous groups, where a consensus of the pure-hearted people and the corrupt elites are set (Mudde, n.d.). Secondly, it ultimately insists that politics should express the general will of the people (Mudde, n.d.). In the Indian context, that established thin-ideology has not appeared in seclusion. Rather it explicitly includes a thicker package of developmentalism, Hindu Nationalism, as well as charismatic leadership. Hence, the reasoning behind why the Indian case is not simply a carbon copy of European radical right populism. However, that is not to say that it is in any way or form completely exceptional. Numerous research based surveys on BJP sympathizers have identified that those who perceive themselves to be close to the party showcase stronger nativist and populist attitudes in comparison to other Indian citizens (Mudde, n.d.). Hence, this suggests that a rather real demand side social base supports BJP's populist rhetoric.

Therefore, if Mudde's framework explains populism as a moral struggle between the pure people and the corrupt elites, then personalist populism shows how that struggle becomes politically organized around a charismatic figure who claims to speak for the people directly. The personalist aspect is central within the analysis of India's populism. Modi's national rise from the

very beginning included campaigns that were structured to portray the party as an extension of the leader rather than the other way around. For instance, early scholars described the 2014 election as a “Modi-centric” BJP campaign (Jaffrelot, 2017). Therefore, BJP’s campaign in that year ignored and surpassed the party’s older collegial style and saturated public space, and rather adopted the leader’s persona as the driving force behind it all. On that very note, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a political scientist highlighted that under Modi’s umbrella, populism and Hindu nationalism coalesce to bring forth the claim that a singular people already exists and that the leader or party alone can speak for it (Mehta, 2022). Hence, within that framework, dissent is easily recast as betrayal. Mehta’s formulation is especially useful as it encapsulates the political theology of Modi’s rule, which states that the unchallenged leader is not merely a successful politician but the custodian of the nation’s moral purpose.

Yet this personalization did not emerge in isolation. Rather, it links its relevance to a wider ideological ecosystem that gives the leader moral meaning, historical purpose, and a constituency larger than the party organization itself. Hence, this glorified personalization is attuned to the longer ideological work of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist movement that Modi emerged from. Hence, this link provides a sense of confidence to other Hindu nationalists, that Modi as a leader is presented as a civilizational figure who will restore historical dignity, protect the majority community, and surpass ordinary party politics. The Hindu nationalists' confidence is so much so that it also explains why Modi’s appeal has often lived past the organizational identity of BJP. In hybrid populist systems, the leader is asked to do what institutions cannot; to reconcile mass aspiration, centralized authority, and national grievance in a single political body. Modi has established that more successfully than any other Indian leader since the early decades after independence. Nonetheless, in that sense, the rise of Modi’s

personalist populism marks not only the success of one leader, but a deeper shift in Indian politics from party mediation toward leader centered rule.

Taken together, this transformation is organizational but also foundational to the logic of hybrid populism. Through the collapse of party identity into the authority of a single leader, the BJP is able to centralize power while still operating within electoral democracy. This personalization is crucial because it enables the regime to claim direct embodiment of 'the people,' thereby weakening institutional mediation and setting the stage for a more centralized and less accountable democratic order.

Welfare Delivery and the Politics of Aspiration

The strongest scholarly argument of Modi's adoption of dual strategy has been made by Yamini Aiyar. Aiyar's argument is that BJP's recent dominance is not solely characterized by cultural majoritarianism, rather it is also explainable through the dependence on welfare policy (Aiyar, 2019). Her core insight is that the BJP has combined pro-poor welfare with right wing cultural politics (Yamini, 2019). This realization is crucial in analyzing Modi because it highlights the reality that the regime is not sustained by resentment alone. Rather, it is sustained by a politically productive collaboration between moral legitimacy as well as material delivery. Hence, he not only urges the voters to fear the established "enemies", but also urges them to see the benefits the state has to offer, or Modi personally has to offer.

The scale of this delivery architecture is evident within government figures. For instance, by 2025, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana had opened more than 54.58 crore bank accounts (Government of India, 2025); by October 2025, Ayshman Bharat- PMJAY had issued more than 42 crore health cards and claimed to cover over 12 crore vulnerable families (Government of

India, 2025). These are merely decontextualized data points. They do not prove program quality, nor do they settle debates about long term distributive impact or even overall program quality. However, they do prove and are a direct reflection of why Modi's welfare politics resonates. The state has become newly legible at the household level through bank accounts, health cards, insurance schemes, and direct transfers. In political terms, they are not just programs. Rather, they are instruments for building a direct relationship between leader and beneficiary.

Hence, this leads to an open discourse where one may argue that Modi's populism is not only ideological; it is performative and distributive. Every offering is narrated as Modi's gift, every involvement as proof of his will, every success as evidence that national progress is impossible without him. That very pattern of mindset is identical to classic personalist populism as established before. Simultaneously, Modi's India also combines populist spectacle to technological institutions and "shared visions of glorified technological and hyper nationalist futures "(Sajjanhar, 2024).Therefore, welfare is not just redistributive, but it is also a spectacle of state intimacy, administrative competence, and political centralization.

Hence, the above establishes the credibility behind why and how Modi is able to inhabit both sides of the populist spectrum. Inherently, he can speak as a protector of the Hindu majority while also posing as the "leader of the poor." The apparent contradiction is resolved by making both claims dependent on the same political logic, which states that the nation is unified, the people are singular, and Modi alone can deliver dignity, security, and uplift all Indians. In that framework, social policy is not defined by majoritarianism. It is almost as if he disguises majoritarian rule with such mechanisms that proves to also be electorally durable.

This dynamic is central to understanding the durability of hybrid populism. Welfare in this context is not simply redistributive policy, but a political instrument that strengthens the

direct relationship between leader and citizen. In doing so, it reinforces electoral legitimacy while simultaneously bypassing institutional accountability, allowing the regime to consolidate support even as democratic norms are gradually weakened.

Hindutva and the Remaking of Citizenship

While welfare explains a large part of Modi's reach, Hindutva explains the regime's deeper ideological agenda. Christophe Jaffrelot argues that Modi's government has moved India toward an ethnic democracy (Jaffrelot, 2017). This is a system in which the formally democratic state increasingly equates the majority community with the nation and pushes minorities toward second class status. In Jaffrelot's account, the issue is not just dominated by prejudice, episodic violence or rhetoric. From what is apparent, it is the gradual restructuring of the polity so that equal citizenship becomes a further reality and thinner in practice even if elections remain robust.

From a certain point of view, Hindu nationalism is therefore built around the sentiments pertaining to victimhood, demographic anxiety, and colonial trauma. Therefore, the anti muslim rhetoric is not incidental to just contemporary Hindutva. Rather, it is the constant ideological element that turns all dissenters, minorities, and critics into enemies of the nation. This is why populism and majoritarianism have such a strong elective kinship in Modi's orchestrated India. As previously established, populism supplies the moral language of "the people," while Hindutva explicitly specifies who "the people" include and exclude.

The institutional consequences of that shift are visible in citizenship and constitutional practice. Madhav Khosla and Milan Vaishnav describe three overlapping transformations in India's contemporary order (Journal of Democracy, n.d.). The three transformations are an ethnic

state, an absolute state, and an opaque state (Journal of Democracy, n.d.). Their argument was rather powerful because it manages to surpass the language of mere “backsliding” and shows how legal changes, executive centralization, and bureaucratic practices work together. They also emphasize on the reality that checks and balances, equal citizenship, and democratic accountability have all been nonetheless weakened, if not entirely absent in certain areas (Journal of Democracy, n.d.). It is also commendable to note the massive role the Citizenship Amendment Act plays within this intricate issue. The act demonstrates how the state has begun to link membership in the political community more explicitly to religious identity.

This suggests that this is an observation that has also been documented on a social standpoint by external observers. The council on Foreign Relations notes that roughly 200 million Muslims live in India and that discrimination against Muslim communities has worsened under BJP rule (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). On that same note, the Pew Research Center has also found that 65% of both Muslims and Hindus saw communal violence as a very big national problem, and that 40% of Muslims in North India reported personally facing religious discrimination in the previous year (Sahgal, 2021). It is still important to note that these findings do not indicate a total social consensus for exclusion. However, they do imply that communal tension is not an entirely elite invention. In fact, it is socially felt, electorally mobilizable, and politically consequential.

Last but not least, damage is not confined to minority rights. Reporters Without Borders says press freedom in India is in crisis, citing violence against journalists, concentrated ownership, and political alignment (RSF, 2026). Freedom House's 2025 country report reported similar harassment of journalists, NGOs, and critics (Freedom House, 2026). These are classic symptoms of a populist scheme that claims electoral legitimacy as sufficient authorization for

state action. It is safe to conclude with the statement that once the leader is equated with the people, scrutiny becomes disloyalty and institutional counter power becomes obstruction.

In this sense, Hindutva provides the ideological backbone of hybrid populism by defining who constitutes “the people” and who falls outside it. This narrowing of citizenship is essential to the regime’s political logic, as it transforms democratic participation into a mere exclusionary project. As a result, elections may remain competitive in form, but they increasingly operate within a constrained framework where pluralism is reduced and dissent is more easily delegitimized.

Developmental ambition and economic contradiction

Modi's majoritarian populism would be much less durable without a developmental horizon. Hence, came into the picture, Viksit Bharat 2047. This is the promise that India will ascend into becoming a developed country by the centenary of independence. In 2023, a government statement connotated Viksit Bharat as a national vision incorporating social progress, good governance, environmental sustainability, and economic growth. Such an ambitious plan is attractive because it allows the regime to frame present sacrifice, leader worship, political centralization as key ways through which the nation would achieve the ultimate national transformation. Hence, from a relevant analytical standpoint, the nation is not only under threat; it is also on the verge of historic ascent.

However, the economic prerequisites for that ascent are rather daunting. The World Bank argues that India cannot reach high income status by 2047 under a business as usual scenario. Its 2024 country economic memorandum estimates that real growth would need to average 7.8% over the coming decades (World Bank, 2025). The report also stresses that India needs more and

better jobs (World Bank, 2025). This is because employment generation has not matched GDP growth. Moreover, there is a need for a stronger domestic investment, higher productivity, and also increased foreign direct investment. Though the development rhetoric takes a rather triumphant view, this is therefore an important corrective. Growth alone is not sufficient; the composition of that growth and the labor market structure behind it are politically decisive.

Within the flow of foreign currency, Foreign exchange, FDI, and remittance prove to be the major 3 sources that ultimately identify a real structural pressure. Official government data reported total FDI inflows of $81.04 billion in FY 2024-25 (Government of India, 2026). On the other hand, the World Bank estimated remittance inflows that were the highest of any low or middle income country of about $129 billion in 2024 (World Bank, 2025). In consideration of the World Bank's emphasis on investment constraints along with these figures, it is reasonably necessary to infer that external inflows remain strategically crucial within the ultimate developmental legitimacy of the Modi project. Hence, a project built around the notion of a "developed India" must keep relentlessly appealing capital, sustaining confidence, as well as producing visible improvements in livelihoods.

Therefore, this is where the limitations of the established hybrid populism start becoming rather apparent. A Reuters analysis of the 2024 election found that the BJP lost a third of its rural parliamentary constituencies compared with 2019, due to deep discontent over inflation, jobs, and declining rural incomes (Thomas et al., 2024). The article posed to be specially relevant because it shows that welfare branding and Hindu nationalism do not eradicate material pressures. They can inherently redirect, postpone and/or symbolically absorb such pressures. However, they do not eliminate them by any means whatsoever. Hence, conclusively, populist

developmental alliance is rather hard to sustain, when incomes are strained and employment remains stagnant.

These economic tensions reveal a critical limitation within hybrid populism. While symbolic politics, welfare distribution, and nationalist narratives can sustain electoral support in the short term, they cannot fully resolve structural economic challenges. This creates a fragile equilibrium in which political legitimacy must be continuously reproduced through performance and spectacle, even as underlying material pressures persist. In this way, the model remains durable, but increasingly strained.

Democracy After the 2024 Election

By 2026, almost two years into Modi's third term, the focus has shifted. The question is no longer whether the 2024 election exposed stress in India's democracy. Rather the question is whether that stress has settled into a lasting pattern. This paper would argue that it has. Rather than dramatic constitutional changes, the BJP has continued to restructure and reshape the system through gradual administrative and legal ways. For instance, the Freedom House's 2026 report argues that the new criminal laws that came into effect in July 2024 have been condemned for allowing the state to possess utmost power over detention and speech, especially when structured around the threats to public order and sovereignty (Freedom House, 2026). Changes in electoral administration have also remained in place, including the 2023 law that increased the Prime Minister's influence over appointments. On the other hand, the Commission's 2025 Bihar Special Intensive Revision removed 65 lakh names from the draft rolls before publishing a final list of roughly 7.42 crore electors (Government of India, 2026).

Additionally, Cross national indicators also show no democratic rebound whatsoever. Freedom House scored India 63/100 in 2025 and 62/100 is 2026 (Freedom House, 2026). Hence, keeping it consistently within the “Partly Free” category. On the other hand, its 2025 internet freedom report gave India 51/100 and documented escalating censorship, arrests over online commentary, and continued internet shutdowns (Freedom House, 2025). The V- Dem Institute’s 2025 report still listed India among the top ten stand alone autocratizers (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Political competition has nonetheless remained real, to a loosely certain reality. Freedom House treated the 2024 arrest of Arvind Kejriwal and the freezing of Congress party accounts as emblematic of the continuing use of the Central Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement Directorate against opponents (Freedom House, 2026). Yet the same Kejriwal case was thrown out by a Delhi court in February 2026. This illustrates how such prosecutions can reshape politics even when they fail in court. Meanwhile though the BJP did regain power in Delhi in February 2025, while the ruling coalition retained Bihar in November 2025 amid voter roll controversy, and seven AAP lawmakers defected in April 2026, strengthening the government’s position in the Rajya Sabha (Freedom House 2025; 2026). At the same time, coalition era limits remain visible. In April 2026, the government failed to pass a constitutional amendment linking women's reservation to parliamentary expansion and delimitation (Freedom House 2026).

Therefore, the broader implication is that hybrid populism has persisted, but in a slightly modified register, Personalization remains central; welfare delivery is still politically potent, but it is increasingly staged as leader attributed largesses, as seen in Modi’s highly publicized September 2025 transfer of 75 billion India Rupees to Bihari Women ahead of the state election (Government of India, 2026). Hence, the result is a regime in which elections still generate uncertainty and occasional resistance, but accountability is more sporadic, pluralism is thinner,

and state capacity is increasingly fused with centralized, leader branded authority than impersonal institutional rule.

The development observed after the 2024 election are best understood as the cumulative outcome of the hybrid populist model outlined above, The personalization of authority, the politicization of welfare, and the narrowing of citizenship have not operated in isolation; rather, they have collectively reshaped the conditions under which democratic competitions now occur.

Conclusion

Conclusively, Modi is a rather complex character in the political landscape. He is neither best understood as a pure religious demagogue or as a conventional developmental reformer. Rather, he is the architect of a hybrid populism that complements a personalist tone of ruling, along with Hindu majoritarianism, technocratic statecraft, and welfare delivery into a single wrapped up present of sorts. That project has been electorally powerful because it speaks simultaneously to aspiration, grievance, need and identity. It tells voters that they belong to the authentic nation that is protected by a strong leader. Hence, they receive benefits through the said protector's direct agency.

However, as already illustrated, the model is deeply flawed and is strained with numerous contradictions. The same politics that borders the BJP's support also marginalizes minorities, weakens institutional autonomy, and erodes liberal democratic safeguards. On the other hand, this rather developmental vision that legitimizes Modi also exposes the regime to uncontrollable economic realities pertaining to job creation, rural distress, and also the promise of Viksit Bharat which demands investment, sustained growth, and social inclusion on a level far greater than slogan or any spectacle alone can ever create. Lastly, the 2024 election showed that voters can

still impose limits. However, it also exposed the truth that the BJP's synthesis of welfare and majoritarianism remains formidable. Modi's significance, then, lies not only in his victories, but in the new political form he has consolidated. The form in which a democratic mandate is utilized to build a more exclusionary, centralized, and more personalized order.

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