9

INDIA'S INEXORABLE PATH TO AUTOCRATIZATION

Looking beyond Modi and the populist lens

Soundarya Chidambaram

Introduction

The unlikely election of Donald Trump in the United States followed by the Brexit vote, contra extensive public opinion and scholarly research, brought into stark focus the rising appeal of populist parties and leaders across the western world. With similar trends manifesting in Eastern and Central Europe, Latin America, and Asia, populism has changed not only the landscape of global politics but also its lexicon (Kyle and Gultchin, 2018). While some scholars tend to assert that populist parties are synonymous with autocratization (Mudde, 2007), there are naysayers who highlight the intrinsic democratic potential of populism by examining movements such as Occupy Wall Street or populist parties like Syriza and Podemos. There are also differing perspectives on the causes of populism ranging from economic disaffection due to rising economic inequalities, a backlash against neoliberal globalization, Euroscepticism, political disenchantment with corrupt elite, to anti-immigration sentiments, and fear of loss of cultural status. One undeniable correlation though is that the electoral success of populist parties has also coincided with a decline of democracy across the globe (Günther and Lührmann, 2018). The focal point in this regard is the rise of populist demagogues and authoritarian strongmen who have caused democratic decline by cracking down on political dissent and curbing the autonomy of the judiciary and the free press, thus creating the conditions for democratic backsliding and decline (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

The path of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in India since 2014 seems to fit this description. The BJP's hegemonic control of Indian politics has been coterminous with aggressive cultural nationalist rhetoric manifesting itself as routinized intimidation and killing of journalists and political critics, vigilante lynching of Muslims and general clampdown on dissent (Kesavan, 2017). Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister and leader of the BJP, epitomizes the populist strongman with his charismatic appeal, centralization of power (Vaishnav, 2019), and ability to connect with the masses through clever use of media (Martelli and Jaffrelot, 2017; Vaishnav, 2021). Not surprisingly, scholars and commentators looking at contemporary Indian politics converge on the idea that Modi's populist leadership of the BJP is the reason for the havoc being wreaked on democratic institutions in the country (Kinnvall, 2019; Chatterji et al., 2019; Basu, 2018; Chacko, 2018; Nilsen, 2018).

However, crediting populist parties and leaders as the exclusive progenitors of authoritarianism is to overlook the deeper societal churning that produces both authoritarianism and the rising appeal of populism. For instance in the US, Trump’s brand of populism is underpinned by a steady process of polarization and creation of echo chambers helping to entrench ethno-racially constituted “us” vs. “them” categories (Williamson et al., 2011). Admittedly, Modi’s unique hold over Indian politics and strongman style of politics has hastened India’s democratic decline, but we need to contextualize this within the broader trajectory of autocratization, and the chauvinistic nationalism of the radical right in India. Though there is an observed association between the BJP’s populist trajectory (the posited independent variable here, or the “IV”) and autocratization (the dependent variable in this case, or the “DV”), I argue that grassroots mobilization by radical right organizations acts as a confounding variable that decides the relationship between these variables – that is, a third factor at play in the background that may affect the purported explanatory relationship between the IV and the DV. The Hindu rightwing movement’s targeted mobilization through civil society activism embeds majoritarian nationalism in public discourse, thus creating the impetus for autocratization while also helping the BJP’s political chances (See Figure 9.1).

This chapter thus provides a corrective to the predominant ways in which discussions about autocratization and radical right movements are often framed. The former is discussed as a consequence of a discrete event in time such as a populist win. The latter is perceived either through the lens of violent tactics or simplistically as a means to advance electoral goals. The chapter is organized thus. Section II defines key terms, reviews the literature, and provides the framework for understanding why and how civil society works as a transmission channel for majoritarianism and autocratization. Section III uses the case of Karnataka in south India to illustrate the central argument by looking at how grassroots mobilization is custom fitted to regional specificities in order to advance the cause of majoritarian nationalism. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications for the study of Hindu Right mobilization in India. The case study particularly illustrates the path forward to understanding why, despite the macro emphasis on welfare provision, we observe subnational variation in grassroots mobilization

Figure 9.1 Theoretical framework specifying the main argument as compared to conventional explanations through identification of the confounding variable.

Source: author (Soundarya Chidambaram).

across regions and states. The chapter ends somewhat pessimistically by forecasting a trajectory of further autocratization once the populist moment passes.

Understanding the trajectory of autocratization in India through the civil society lens

India's path to democratic decline has come into stark relief recently. Varieties of Democracy now classifies India as an electoral autocracy (Alizada et al., 2021). Freedom House has downgraded India's ranking from Free to Partly Free "due to a multiyear pattern in which the Hindu nationalist government and its allies have presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters" (Freedom House, 2021). In particular, these measures capture what the state does to hinder democratic foundations. However, autocratization is not merely the cumulative effect of state actions that erode macro-indicators of democratic functioning. Such a conceptualization would implicate political parties of all ideological persuasions in India, and certainly, Modi's rise to power in 2014 would not then constitute the flipping of the democracy/autocratization switch. I argue instead that autocratization should be understood as an incremental process of democratic erosion that, in India, has come about through the gradual mainstreaming of majoritarian ideas – a process mediated as much by grassroots radical right mobilization as it is by top-down political party actions. I use the term majoritarianism in this chapter, drawing upon Hansen's (2019) definition: "Majoritarianism commonly refers to the idea that pre-existing ethnic, racial or religious majorities have a natural right to dominate a certain political entity." In this sense, autocratization is as much a reflection of people's acceptance of the reversal of democratic principles in favour of chauvinistic nationalism and a narrow conception of citizenship. Viewed thus, authoritarian politics in India has a much longer history that predates Modi's brand of populist politics.

This brings us to the radical right and the BJP's place in this universe vs. the conventional left-right spectrum. First, it is somewhat incongruous to equate the BJP with populist parties in the west. The latter, despite underlying nationalist and xenophobic elements, are essentially rooted in economic discontent and political disenchantment. In contrast, chauvinistic nationalism is at the core of the BJP's ideological agenda (Dreze, 2020; Jaffrelot, 2019), while its economic positioning changes on a need-to basis (Basu, 2018; Mukhopadhyay, 2019; Roychowdhury, 2017; Sen, 2019; Sircar, 2020). While comparisons could be made to "nativist populist radical right" parties in Europe that have sprung from exclusionary nationalist ideologies like Sweden Democrats or Golden Dawn in Greece (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), two factors that set the BJP apart are i) its relative electoral strength, and ii) its unique advantage due to its embeddedness within a larger established movement.

To illustrate the first point, parties such as the Sweden Democrats, UK Independence Party, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, and to some degree the National Front in France, were fringe/marginal parties that only recently gained traction due to a unique confluence of economic crisis coupled with increased immigration (Larsson, 2016). In contrast, the BJP's political trajectory has always been much more mainstream. Secondly, the BJP is one constituent of the organizationally streamlined, well resourced, radical right social movement in India that targets diverse grassroots constituencies through group-specific initiatives vernacularized to appeal within local contexts. In this chapter, the term radical right is used to characterize parties and movements rooted in an ethnic conception of nationhood and that use nationalist nostalgia and national pride to build support (Lubbers, 2019; Lubbers and Coenders, 2017).

For the radical Hindu right movement (referred to as Hindu Right in the text), the use of such chauvinist nationalist rhetoric is not merely a means to an end – an electoral strategy chosen for its political expediency – but rather the end itself in trying to bring its vision of the “*Hindu Rashtra*” to fruition. Modi himself is a product of the rightwing movement. He not only rose up the ranks of the Hindu Right but it was the latter that laid the groundwork for the appeal of Modi’s rhetoric (NPR, 2019). This theoretical distinction between right populism and transformative radical right movements is important because while perhaps an electorally expedient populism can be resisted as we are seeing now in the US, the transformation of public consciousness using the civil society route is more insidious and much harder to displace (Vanaik, 2017). In India, what one may be witnessing is not just a temporary institutional decline of democracy but an ideological reckoning with democratic norms. For instance, Palshikar (2015) characterizes this phenomenon as the tilting of political culture in India towards *Hindutva*, while Harriss et al. (2017, p. 7) use the term “banal *Hindutva*” to describe this “steady spread of everyday forms of Hindu nationalism”.

This brings us to the key explanatory variable, the radical right movement’s civil society mobilization in India. For a long time, civil society was perceived to be an inherently pluralistic space that increases social capital (Fukuyama, 2001; Putnam et al., 1994). However, now there is empirical evidence highlighting the dark side of social capital (Berman, 1997; Bermeo and Nord, 2000; Carothers and Barndt, 1999; Diamond, 1994; Shirer, 1990; Whitehead, 1997). More broadly, it is no longer easy to dismiss the civil society sphere as a realm for non-state actors without political power or electoral impact. Civil society is neither epiphenomenal nor peripheral to national political developments. The Hindu Right’s positioning as a social movement acting through civil society outside of formal political mechanisms is important particularly since it can mobilize various constituencies through strategies that are not available to the political party.

Studies that look at the Hindu Right’s civil society activism often tend to focus narrowly on militant and provocative mobilization such as riots, religious processions, cow protection, or “love Jihad” as the route through which the rightwing primes its target audience and creates antagonistic narratives (Fuller, 2001; Kanungo, 2008; Spodek, 2010; Vijayan, 2018; Zavos, 2001). However, contentious polarization is not the only mode through which the Hindu Right lays the groundwork for the spread of majoritarian rhetoric. For instance, Islamist social movements provide a good point of comparison for how targeted welfare provision is used to advance movement goals rather than narrow electoral gains (Cammatt and Issar, 2010; J. Clark, 2004; Clark, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2000). In similar vein, the Hindu Right uses seemingly innocuous social service provision activities to create opportunities to connect with local communities in non-provocative ways that nonetheless come with socialization into the core agenda (Beckerlegge, 2016; Bhattacharjee, 2016; Chidambaram, 2012; Jaffrelot, 2008; Thachil, 2011). Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Hindu Right strategically invested in welfare provision to local communities across India (see Figure 9.2). This was partly due to the backlash against the nationwide violence following the rightwing-led movement that led to the demolition of a 500-year-old mosque in northern India in December 1992. Welfare was also perceived as a means to counter lower caste mobilization that would hamper the movement’s vision of an undivided Hindu society (Jaffrelot, 2005).

However, many studies look at communities or regions in isolation (Baviskar, 2005; Dhar, 2004; Fuller, 2001; Hansen, 1996; Lobo, 2002; Longkumer, 2016; Teltumbde, 2020), or at aspects of welfare provision such as education without evaluating the broader connections that come about through these initiatives within local spaces (Chaudhary, 2017; Froerer, 2007; Sarkar, 1994). In contrast, this chapter takes a broader view of grassroots rightwing mobilization

Figure 9.2 Seva Bharati's expansion of welfare projects in India over two decades

Source: Data from various print and web editions of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's publications, Seva Disha and Sewa Sadhana, which provide detailed records of welfare initiatives launched by the grassroots organizations across Indian states. The web editions are available here: www.rashtriyasewabharati.org/sewa-disha.

to understand the concurrent mobilization of disparate sections within diverse spaces. First, I look at how education-focused welfare provision is utilized beyond just the target audience as a means of community-wide mobilization. Additionally, I look beyond welfare provision to focus on how heterogeneous segments of society simultaneously become primed to lean towards majoritarian ideas despite their very different socio-economic needs and characteristics. To do this, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork from the southern Indian state of Karnataka. I examine two varied sections of the urban population in Bengaluru, Karnataka's capital city – slum communities and young professionals in the IT/BPO sector – using fieldwork conducted in the city in 2009 along with secondary literature.

Karnataka: an empirical case study

Karnataka is an interesting case study for grassroots mobilization and autocratization. The Hindutva movement was traditionally an important influencer of politics in the northern part of India. In contrast, the south, with its history of social justice movements and anti-Brahminical politics, was seen as impervious to rightwing ideological mobilization. The emphasis on a Sanskritized homogeneous Hindu identity in particular did not often mesh with the religio-cultural traditions of the south. Yet, Karnataka is the one southern state where the BJP has consistently done well in the last two decades, both in national and in state elections. The state has also experienced intense polarization, anti-minority violence against Muslims and

Christians, incidents of moral policing by vigilante Hindu groups, and riling up controversies around wedge issues (Pinto, 2013; Sayeed, 2018; Kuthar, 2019). This ostensibly seems to confirm the hypothesis that the BJP's rise to power legitimates the space for majoritarian mobilization and autocratization. However, organizations affiliated with the Hindu Right had been building connections with local communities in Karnataka long before the BJP achieved electoral success in the state. One could plausibly argue that the mainstreaming of exclusionary majoritarian narratives is the denouement of a steady process of rightwing mobilization of grassroots constituencies in Karnataka. I flesh out the micro-level dynamics of how this mobilization takes shape differently depending on the audience.

Service provision in urban slums

Poor urban communities in India often face acute gaps in basic service provision. Forced to live in urban slums, they experience severe under-provision of basic services such as water, sanitation, and health services (Bapat and Agarwal, 2003; Zerah, 2000). In addition, they often lag behind in terms of access to education. Relying largely on government-run schools that suffer from poor infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, or staff shortages, puts students coming from poorer communities at a disadvantage (Agrawal, 2014; Desai et al., 2014; Kingdon, 2007). Neoliberal reforms pushed many such urban communities into precarity by forcing them into the informal sector (Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001; Hensman, 2001; Roychowdhury, 2003), while exacerbating the gaps in public service provision. The absence of an organized union or civil society response leaves them without adequate representation or social safety nets. This was also the period when *Seva Bharati* (an RSS affiliate organization that caters specifically to urban slum communities) began investing significant resources in social services, particularly free educational services to children such as tutoring and/or offering alternatives to government-run schools across India (refer to Figure 9.2 above). The neoliberal economics of the 1990s provided the rightwing organizations a captive audience as it were for the uptake of this welfare strategy. This welfare provision trend was mirrored in Karnataka as well where there was a significant expansion in welfare provision by the Hindu Right (see Figure 9.3), and great emphasis on education initiatives in urban slums as revealed below.

My fieldwork revealed that *Rashtrothana Parishat* (RP), a rightwing affiliate organization which helped administer education-related welfare projects on behalf of the *Seva Bharati*, managed 150 non-formal tutoring centres in 109 urban slums in Bengaluru. The initiative employed 200 teachers, who were overseen by supervisors and provided monthly training sessions. I observed two such tutoring centres in two slums in the city to understand the dynamics and impact of community mobilization. First, these centres used education as the first step in the path towards more rigorous ideological immersion for schoolchildren (Sagar, 2020). This was done through the medium of curricular content but also participation in other activities. These centres were informal and were not forced to adhere to any approved models of coursework or monitored by any regulatory body. They developed their own curriculum using textbooks published by the RSS and the RP. The daily lesson plans helped disseminate majoritarian narratives through an emphasis on religio-cultural rituals and Hindu *samskara* (traditions) such as prayers and songs. Lessons about Hindu mythology were then seamlessly connected to historical events and patriotism, thus grounding nationalism in Hindu beliefs. My interview with a senior functionary of the Karnataka branch of *Vidya Bharati* (an RSS affiliate organization working in the field of education) provided interesting insights into the pedagogy and content at such centres as well as other formal schools run by RSS affiliates. He said:

Figure 9.3 Seva Bharati's expansion of welfare projects in Karnataka over two decades

Source: Data from various print and web editions of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's publications, Seva Disha and Sewa Sadhana, which provide detailed records of welfare initiatives launched by the grassroots organizations across Indian states. The web editions are available here: www.rashtriyasewabharati.org/sewa-disha.

We insist on religious prayers, shlokas (Sanskrit religious chants), worship of Hindu gods at our educational centres and schools. Our philosophy is that teaching only school subjects is not enough. Emotional grounding is needed. We do not just teach geography, we emphasize religious geography. We want children not just to be able to mark the Ganges on the map of India, but truly understand why the Ganges is sacred to Hindus. We want to create amongst children an emotional attachment to the land. Some communist organizations and media people allege that what we are doing is "Saffronization" of education. To such skeptics, my answer is yes, we are providing religious education in the business, because we believe that education should be spiritually rooted and because this is giving us success.

*(Interview with Assistant Organizational Secretary,
Vidya Bharati, 12 August 2009)*

Teachers interviewed at the centres revealed that teenage boys good at sports and physical activity (the instructors were supposed to monitor this and report to the Parishat) were asked to attend weekly training camps at the Parishat premises on Sundays to learn martial arts, watch patriotic films and have conversations about nationalism and Hindu values. Periodically, trainees from all centres across the city would be invited to attend state RSS meets where prominent national and state level RSS leaders were invited to talk. For instance, during the course of the fieldwork, I was able attend one such public meeting in Bengaluru addressed by Mohan Bhagwat, the national leader of the RSS, on 22 November 2009. Newspapers estimated that around 15,000 RSS activists had gathered to hear the meeting. I was able to ride with a group of RSS workers and trainees from one such training centre. As we rode past a mosque or a church, the RSS workers started shouting slogans about Hindu unity, perhaps revealing the exclusionary and majoritarian way of thinking emphasized by these centres.

Second, the centres played a significant role in creating legitimacy for the Hindu Right within communities, paving the way for the uptake of other initiatives. The centres immersed themselves in the local social dynamics of the neighbourhood, and recruited instructors and volunteers from the local community, often providing much needed employment avenues as well as opportunities for upward social mobility, thus gaining acceptance and support within the communities. My interviews with the two instructors at the two centres revealed that both of them viewed their position with the Parishat as appealing long-term opportunities because of the lack of other channels of mobility/employment and the lack of linkages with local political patrons to advance their cause. One instructor specifically mentioned the apathy of the local councillor of the neighbourhood, responding to whether there had been any local political resistance to the setting up of a tutoring centre there, thus indicating why such service provision gains credibility quickly (interview with instructor, 1 December 2009). The other instructor told me that they had been promised a permanent teaching position (interview with instructor, 5 December 2009).

Third, the centres used their space for community celebration of Hindu festivals. This had two effects, both of which aligned with the Hindu Right's movement goals. Since these centres were often situated in religiously heterogeneous communities, the celebrations created local flashpoints used to drive a wedge between different religious groups, thus constructing ethnic antagonisms (this insight came from an interview with a professor of urban policy who had extensively studied Bengaluru's urban slum dynamics. The interview was conducted on 3 August 2009). Secondly, the celebrations served as platforms for political mobilization. It gave centres the opportunity to involve parents and the broader Hindu community in ongoing conversations about religion and culture, and building connections between communities and movement leaders who were periodically invited to speak at these occasions. Women, in particular, were incentivized to participate in Hindu religious rituals at temples and *bhajan mandalis* for religious prayers by employing games and competitions with cash prizes [interviews with centre instructor and two women in the neighbourhood, 5 December 2009]. I interviewed two journalists from two different newspapers who had reported about these centres and they corroborated this fairly standardized pattern of mobilization. "The first contact is through women and children. Free summer camps provide huge incentives for parents. Bhajan classes draw in the women. There is subtle inculcation of Hindu-centric rhetoric", reported one journalist (interview on 10 August 2009). "Educational manipulation has always been at the top of the RSS agenda. That is the way to promote cultural nationalism. Women are an untouched electorate and the RSS is cashing in on this advantage. The RSS has been operating clandestinely at the grassroots here for a long time", confirmed another journalist (interview on 12 August 2009).

On the one hand, the curriculum subtly created a synergy between Hindu religio-cultural traditions, patriotism and nationalism. Simultaneously, the centre mobilized the wider community beyond the intended audience of schoolchildren. They used the centres to create tangible rewards for the local community such as employment. They also mobilized women through activities that strategically straddle the middle ground between "traditional" and "modern", thus creating culturally/ideologically appropriate public spaces for women to serve within the local community without transgressing patriarchal boundaries. Thus, education became a means to a larger end – the incentivized incorporation of the broader Hindu community within the movement fold. Overall, it helped establish homogenized narratives and traditions of culture and religion and connected this back to themes of nationalism (Mohan, 2016; Pinto, 2013).

Modern-age shakhas for young IT professionals

At the time of the fieldwork, the RSS had also made a significant impact amongst young professionals that had become part of Bengaluru's IT success story. The IT/BPO sector was one that was traditionally ignored by trade unions for a long time. A Member of Parliament belonging to a left party told me that the left trade union movement had found it hard to unionize or mobilize IT professionals using traditional means. "The IT crowd is apolitical, and the trade union movement in Bengaluru has pretty much disappeared" (interview on 17 November 2009). Yet, the RSS had creatively reached out to them using welfare provision. My interviews with RP and an associate affiliate, Youth for Sewa, revealed that many people were initially attracted to volunteering opportunities for Parishat-sponsored activities such as blood donation drives, mobile health camps, or teaching children at the slum tutoring centres on a part-time basis (interview on 14 August 2009). This was then converted into broader politically themed meetings about religious conversion, terrorism, and nationalism among other themes (Lulla, 2010; Nanjappa, 2007). They were then recruited to attend IT *Milans* – a weekly adaptation of the traditional RSS daily *shakha* meetings. These allowed for IT professionals coming to the city from different parts of India to become part of a like-minded community. It was an initiative that began in 2000 that within a decade had grown to over 134 such meeting groups bringing together 6,000 professionals on a regular basis (Aravind, 2016). The RSS was able to woo young professionals to these meetings via offering Yoga lessons as a means of de-stressing and invoking Corporate Social Responsibility to get them involved in volunteer activities.

It would be erroneous to argue that all public discourse reflecting majoritarian and anti-democratic ideas can be traced back to these grassroots right organizations, or discount the fact that BJP's electoral wins helped reinforce these trends. However, one has to acknowledge that such civil society interventions definitely helped move the needle on how majoritarian ideas began to be perceived and debated and what kind of mainstream acceptance/support they have garnered over the years (Lankesh, 2008). In Karnataka, majoritarian notions about the protection of Hindu religious traditions and idealized revisionist historical narratives were reflected in macro-level policies, leading to several controversial bills. The Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Protection of Cow bill was passed in 2010 in what Rao (2011) calls silent communalism and religio-environmentalism. Similarly, a draconian anti-terrorism law, Karnataka Control of Organised Crimes (Amendment) Bill, perceived as targeting minority groups, was passed in 2009 (Sayeed, 2009). Rightwing affiliate organizations were accused of trying to "saffronize" school textbooks by introducing revisionist versions of history and culture (Chopra, 2012). Mass protests using ground-level volunteers were organized to rile up controversy around syncretic religious sites such as Bababudangiri (Menon, 2003). All these policies in a sense are a macro-aggregation of the kind of small-scale interventions initiated within local communities.

What the case study reveals markedly is the fact that these customized rightwing initiatives largely eschewed overtly negative, aggressive, or violent messaging in trying to draw two disparate segments into their network. Yet these actions were no less effective in how, over time, they changed broad attitudes towards minority rights and right-leaning policy agendas that were contrarian to secular democratic principles. Welfare provision allowed for inclusion of marginalized segments of society. Yet, as the outreach towards Bengaluru's IT sector demonstrates, the rightwing movement acts strategically by "vernacularizing" its initiatives in innovative ways to reach heretofore unmobilized constituencies. Overall, these civil society initiatives created spaces for inclusive participation from a broad cross-section of people in Bengaluru.

Concluding thoughts

The previous section established that the propagation of majoritarian nationalist discourse and the unfolding of autocratization is not simply a top-down process set in motion by populist strongmen. What the Karnataka case study demonstrates is how rightwing grassroots priming, the confounding variable identified in this study, works. The subtle nuances and impact of local mobilization initiatives are often overlooked because of the spotlight on aggressive tactics employed by right vigilante organizations. Everyday exposure to exclusionary and nativist ideas via innocuous community initiatives gradually mainstreams narratives that are polarizing, and over time leads to ethnic antagonisms. It is this slow entrenchment of majoritarianism that helps lay the groundwork for both autocratization of society and polity, and electoral victories for the BJP. This process could not be comprehended if one were to take a narrow view of autocratization and the rightwing in India. How the rightwing movement works at the grassroots through the civil society sphere is key to understanding how public culture has gradually transformed in favour of an ethnonational view of the nation.

The Karnataka case study reveals an additional important insight about the Hindu right's grassroots strategy. It is not surprising that the Hindu Right movement constructs exclusionary ethnonational "us" vs. "them" narratives by reinterpreting local cultural leitmotifs in various vernacular contexts. What this chapter uniquely illustrates is how these narratives are packaged and targeted at disparate constituencies using the rightwing's diverse network of specialized affiliate organizations. Moreover, grassroots mobilization is not monolithic. While there is a core emphasis on welfare, at the same time rightwing affiliate organizations are able to expand beyond this focus and customize strategies to appeal to various constituencies across different states/regions. Locally relevant and resonant strategies of mobilization are a key part of the rightwing's arsenal. For instance, grassroots mobilization using aggressive "love jihad" or cow protection discourses is more evident in rural mofussil areas in north Indian states than in say urban parts of Karnataka. Even these more overtly aggressive forms of cultural policing vary in intensity temporally. Thus, from the perspective of future research, a fine-grained analysis is likely to reveal a significant degree of subnational variation in the kinds of themes and outreach activities that are used. It is also likely that there is significant variation in trajectories and timelines with respect to how quickly and deeply majoritarian discourses take hold and change political attitudes. For our current analysis, what appears then to be a macro trend that aligns with the global populist wave is essentially a cumulative process made up of smaller micro-level changes.

Historically, there has been a great ideological and strategic synergy between the rightwing movement and the party's agenda. However, with the populist approach yielding dividends, the fulcrum of decision-making seems to have shifted to the Prime Minister's office. However, there are also limits to constructing antagonistic ethnonational narratives for political mileage narratives and painting all political opponents as anti-national. Even with the decisive majorities in both 2014 and 2019, there are regions in the south and east that remain invulnerable to the righting mobilization that uses provocative cultural nationalistic messaging. Election losses in states such as West Bengal in the 2021 state legislative elections demonstrate this. The government's handling of the nationwide protests on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 and farmers' agitations against new farm laws passed in 2020 to restructure the agriculture sector has drawn political criticism nationally and internationally, sometimes even from its own affiliate organizations, thus denting Modi's carefully crafted image. Similarly the downgrading of India's democratic ratings as well as attacks on academic freedom have drawn both national and international censure. What does this mean for BJP's brand of populism, the broader movement, and consequently autocratization of politics? When the populist moment inevitably

runs out of steam, the party may have to go back to its organizational roots as it were, and act in synergy with the broader ideological movement agenda to refresh its image. This portends not an abatement but rather an exacerbation of the authoritarian trends that are already in motion across the country. A final pertinent question is can this process of autocratization (populist or not) be reversed? Can the deeply embedded discursive hegemony be effectively challenged? As the powers-that-be curb the space for meaningful dialogue and contemporary public discourse views even legitimate protests as seditious dissent, it is hard to imagine how these opposing forces can be reconciled.

Bibliography

- Agrawal, T., 2014. Educational inequality in rural and urban India. *International Journal of Educational Development* 34, 11–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2013.05.002>
- Alizada, Nazifa, Rowan Cole, Lisa Gastaldi, Sandra Grahm, Sebastian Hellmeier, Palina Kolvani, Jean Lachapelle, Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Shreeya Pillai, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2021. *Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021*. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.
- Aravind, I., 2016. Devananda Gaddam: Meet the data architect who is taking technology to the RSS shakhas in Bengaluru – The Economic Times [WWW Document]. URL <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/devananda-gaddam-meet-the-data-architect-who-is-taking-technology-to-the-rss-shakhas-in-bengaluru/articleshow/54270280.cms?from=mdr> (accessed 2.13.21).
- Bapat, M., Agarwal, I., 2003. Our Needs, Our Priorities: Women and Men from the Slums in Mumbai and Pune Talk about their Needs for Water and Sanitation. *Environment and Urbanization* 15, 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095624780301500221>
- Basu, A., 2018. Whither Democracy, Secularism, and Minority Rights in India? *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 16, 34–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2018.1535035>
- Baviskar, A., 2005. Adivasi Encounters with Hindu Nationalism in MP. *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, 5105–5113.
- Beckerlegge, G., 2016. Sevā: The Focus of a Fragmented but Gradually Coalescing Field of Study. *Rosa* 9, 208–239.
- Berman, S., 1997. Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic. *World Pol.* 49, 401–429. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.1997.0008>
- Bermeo, N., Nord, P., 2000. *Civil Society Before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Bhattacharjee, M., 2016. Sevā, Hindutva, and the Politics of Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction in Rural Kutch. *AE* 75. <https://doi.org/10.18874/ae.75.1.04>
- Cammett, M., Issar, S., 2010. Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon. *World Pol.* 62, 381–421. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887110000080>
- Carothers, T., Barndt, W., 1999. Civil Society. *Foreign Policy* 18–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149558>
- Chacko, P., 2018. Authoritarian Populism in India. *Progress in Political Economy (PPE)*. URL www.ppesydney.net/authoritarian-populism-in-india/ (accessed 1.13.21).
- Chatterji, A.P., Hansen, T.B., Jaffrelot, C., 2019. *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chaudhary, N., 2017. RSS Textbook Visuals: Building a Hindu Rashtra through Bharat Mata and Gaumata Images. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 78, 1155–1164.
- Chidambaram, S., 2012. The “Right” Kind of Welfare in South India’s Urban Slums: Seva vs. Patronage and the Success of Hindu Nationalist Organizations. *Asian Survey* 52, 298–320. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.2.298>
- Chopra, R., 2012. NCERT probes into allegations of strong saffron slant in Karnataka textbooks by the BJP govt [WWW Document]. *India Today*. URL www.indiatoday.in/india/story/ncert-probes-into-bjp-allegations-of-saffronisation-of-karnataka-textbooks-124691-2012-12-19 (accessed 2.13.21).
- Clark, J., 2004. Social Movement Theory and Patron-Clientelism: Islamic Social Institutions and the Middle Class in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen. *Comparative Political Studies* 37, 941–968. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414004267982>
- Clark, J.A., 2004. *Islam, Charity, and Activism*. Indiana University Press.

- Desai, S., Barik, D., Agrawal, T., 2014. Poorly performing public services. *The Hindu*. URL www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/poorly-performing-public-services/article5860718.ece (accessed 9.1.21).
- Dhar, A., 2004. The Hindu: Making inroads into the tribal belt [WWW Document]. URL www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2004/03/18/stories/2004031803181300.htm (accessed 5.23.10).
- Diamond, L., 1994. Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation. *Journal of Democracy* 5, 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1994.0041>
- Dreze, J., 2020. The Revolt of the Upper Castes [WWW Document]. *The India Forum*. URL www.theindiaforum.in/article/revolt-upper-castes (accessed 5.27.20).
- Freedom House, 2021. India: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report [WWW Document]. *Freedom House*. URL <https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021> (accessed 3.16.21).
- Froerer, P., 2007. Disciplining the Saffron Way: Moral Education and the Hindu Rashtra. *Modern Asian Studies* 41, 1033–1071.
- Fukuyama, F., 2001. Social capital, civil society and development. *Third World Quarterly* 22, 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713701144>
- Fuller, C.J., 2001. The “Vinayaka Chaturthi” Festival and Hindutva in Tamil Nadu. *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, 1607–1616.
- Kuthar, G. 2019. How coastal Karnataka was saffronised: The story of the rise and rise of Hindu nationalism in syncretic South Kanara – India News, *Firstpost* [WWW Document]. URL www.firstpost.com/india/how-coastal-karnataka-was-saffronised-the-story-of-the-rise-and-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-syncretic-south-kanara-6363461.html (accessed 2.13.21).
- Günther, L., Lührmann, A., 2018. *Populism and Autocratization*. *Populism and Autocratization* (No. 19), V-Dem Policy Brief. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.
- Hansen, T.B., 1996. The vernacularisation of Hindutva: The BJP and Shiv Sena in rural Maharashtra. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 30, 177–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/006996679603000201>
- Hansen, T.B., 2019. Democracy Against the Law: Reflections on India’s Illiberal Democracy, in: *Majoritarian State*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190078171.003.0002>
- Harriss, J., Corbridge, S., Jeffrey, C., 2017. Is India Becoming the ‘Hindu Rashtra’ Sought by Hindu Nationalists? (SWP 60).
- Harriss-White, B., Gooptu, N., 2001. Mapping India’s World of Unorganized Labour. *Socialist Register* 37.
- Hensman, R., 2001. The Impact of Globalisation on Employment in India and Responses from the Formal and Informal Sectors. *International Institute for Asian Studies* (IIAS).
- Jaffrelot, C. (Ed.), 2005. *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader, Critical issues in Indian politics*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Jaffrelot, C., 2008. Hindu Nationalism and the Social Welfare Strategy, in: Clarke, G., Jennings, M. (Eds.), *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*, International Political Economy Series. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 240–259. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230371262_11
- Jaffrelot, C., 2019. *A De Facto Ethnic Democracy?: Obliterating and Targeting the Other, Hindu Vigilantes, and the Ethno-State, Majoritarian State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kanungo, P., 2008. Hindutva’s Fury against Christians in Orissa. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, 16–19.
- Kesavan, M., 2017. India: Assassinating Dissent [WWW Document]. *The New York Review of Books*. URL www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/09/15/india-assassinating-dissent/ (accessed 2.13.21).
- Kingdon, G.G., 2007. The progress of school education in India. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 23, 168–195. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grm015>
- Kinnvall, C., 2019. Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, 283–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1588851>.
- Kyle, J., Gultchin, L., 2018. *Populists in Power Around the World*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.
- Lankesh, G., 2008. How Karnataka is becoming Gujarat of South [WWW Document]. URL <https://churumuri.blog/2008/02/28/how-karnataka-is-becoming-gujarat-of-the-south/> (accessed 2.13.21).
- Larsson, P., 2016. The Far Right Comes to Sweden [WWW Document]. URL <https://jacobinmag.com/2016/01/sweden-democrats-jimmie-akesson-far-right-europe/> (accessed 3.16.21).
- Levitsky, S., Ziblatt, D., 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Crown.
- Lobo, L., 2002. Adivasis, Hindutva and Post-Godhra Riots in Gujarat. *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, 4844–4849.

- Longkumer, A., 2016. The power of persuasion: Hindutva, Christianity, and the discourse of religion and culture in Northeast India. *Religion* 47, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1256845>
- Lubbers, M., 2019. What kind of nationalism sets the radical right and its electorate apart from the rest? Pride in the nation's history as part of nationalist nostalgia. *Nations and Nationalism* 25, 449–466. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12517>
- Lubbers, M., Coenders, M., 2017. Nationalistic attitudes and voting for the radical right in Europe. *European Union Politics* 18, 98–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116516678932>
- Lulla, Anil, B., 2010. Sangh's e-Sevaks. *Open The Magazine*. URL <https://openthemagazine.com/features/india/sanghs-e-sevaks/> (accessed 2.13.21).
- Martelli, J.-T., Jaffrelet, C., 2017. Reading PM Modi, Through His Speeches [WWW Document]. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. URL <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/08/15/reading-pm-modi-through-his-speeches-pub-72825> (accessed 2.14.21).
- Menon, P., 2003. A communal campaign [WWW Document]. *Frontline*. URL <https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/article30220299.ece> (accessed 2.13.21).
- Mohan, R., 2016. Indianise, nationalise, spiritualise: The RSS education project is in expansion mode [WWW Document]. *Scroll.in*. URL <http://scroll.in/article/815049/indianise-nationalise-spiritualise-the-rss-education-project-is-in-for-the-long-haul> (accessed 2.14.21).
- Mudde, C., 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>
- Mudde, C., Kaltwasser, C.R., 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mukhopadhyay, A., 2019. From “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas” to “Main Bhi Chowkidar”: The forgotten macroeconomic flagships [WWW Document]. *ORF*. URL www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/from-sabka-saath-sabka-vikas-to-main-bhi-chowkidar-the-forgotten-macroeconomic-flagships-50640/ (accessed 4.26.20).
- Nanjappa, V., 2007. Latest from RSS: The IT shakha [WWW Document]. URL www.rediff.com/news/2007/nov/12vicky.htm (accessed 2.13.21).
- Nilsen, A.G., 2018. Authoritarian populism and popular struggles in Modi's India [WWW Document]. *OpenDemocracy*. URL www.opendemocracy.net/en/authoritarian-populism-and-popular-struggles-in-modi-s-india/ (accessed 1.13.21).
- NPR, 2019. The Powerful Group Shaping The Rise Of Hindu Nationalism In India [WWW Document]. *NPR.org*. URL www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india (accessed 3.17.21).
- Palshikar, S., 2015. The BJP and Hindu Nationalism: Centrist Politics and Majoritarian Impulses. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, 719–735. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2015.1089460>
- Pinto, A., 2013. *Five Years of Saffron Rule in Karnataka*. New Delhi: Manak Publications.
- Putnam, R.D., Leonardi, R., Nanetti, R.Y., 1994. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.
- Roychowdhury, A., 2017. What the Data Tells Us About “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas” [WWW Document]. *The Wire*. URL <https://thewire.in/business/whatever-happened-to-modis-development> (accessed 2.14.21).
- Roychowdhury, S., 2003. Public Sector Restructuring and Democracy: The State, Labour and Trade Unions in India. *The Journal of Development Studies* 39, 29–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220380412331322811>
- Sagar, 2020. For the RSS, “sewa” is a means to achieve the Hindu Rashtra [WWW Document]. *The Caravan*. URL <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/rss-sewa-coronavirus-lockdown-brahmanical-hindu-rashtra> (accessed 2.13.21).
- Sarkar, T., 1994. Educating the Children of the Hindu Rashtra: Notes on RSS Schools. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 14, 10–15. <https://doi.org/10.1215/07323867-14-2-10>
- Sayeed, V.A., 2009. An Act in question [WWW Document]. *Frontline*. URL <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/article30188460.ece> (accessed 2.13.21).
- Sayeed, V.A., 2018. A battlefield in the south [WWW Document]. *Frontline*. URL <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/a-battlefront-in-the-south/article10074157.ece> (accessed 2.13.21).
- Sen, R., 2019. Everyone Thinks the Economy Is Issue No. 1 for India's Modi. It's Not – Foreign Policy [WWW Document]. URL <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/21/everyone-thinks-the-economy-is-issue-no-1-for-indias-modi-its-not/> (accessed 2.14.21).

- Shirer, W.L., 1990. *Rise And Fall Of The Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Sircar, N., 2020. Not vikas, Modi's 2019 election was built on politics of vishwas [WWW Document]. URL <https://theprint.in/opinion/not-vikas-modis-2019-election-was-built-on-politics-of-vishwas/432487/> (accessed 3.21.21).
- Spodek, H., 2010. In the Hindutva Laboratory: Pogroms and Politics in Gujarat, 2002. *Modern Asian Studies* 44, 349–399.
- Teltumbde, A., 2020. *Hindutva and Dalits: Perspectives for Understanding Communal Praxis*. New Delhi: SAGE Publishing India.
- Thachil, T., 2011. Embedded Mobilization: Nonstate Service Provision as Electoral Strategy in India. *World Politics* 63, 434–469. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887111000116>
- Vaishnav, M., 2019. Religious Nationalism and India's Future – The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism [WWW Document]. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. URL <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/religious-nationalism-and-india-s-future-pub-78703> (accessed 8.31.21).
- Vaishnav, M., 2021. The Decay of Indian Democracy [WWW Document]. *Foreign Affairs*. URL www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2021-03-18/decay-indian-democracy (accessed 3.21.21).
- Vanaik, A., 2017. *The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism: Secular Claims, Communal Realities*. Updated and expanded edition. London, New York: Verso.
- Vijayan, M., 2018. *The Ascent of Conservative Civil Society in India – The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Whitehead, L., 1997. Bowling in the bronx: The uncivil interstices between civil and political society. *Democratization* 4, 94–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510349708403504>
- Wiktorowicz, Q., 2000. Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan. *Comparative Politics* 33, 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/422423>
- Williamson, V., Skocpol, T., Coggin, J., 2011. The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism. *Perspect. polit.* 9, 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271000407X>
- Zavos, J., 2001. Conversion and the assertive margins: An analysis of Hindu nationalist discourse and the recent attacks on Indian Christians. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 24, 73–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400108723451>
- Zerah, M.-H., 2000. *Water: Unreliable Supply in Delhi*, 1st edition. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.