The BJP's use of online Authoritarian populism to advance an Ethnoreligious Nationalist agenda in the 2019 General Election poses a threat to Indian Democracy.

Dr. Nandita Haksar

Dr. Kaviraj Vaishnav

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Abstract

With a landslide victory in 2014 and reelection in 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi has been a pioneer of technology enabled authoritarian populism. However, there are still significant unanswered concerns regarding the prevalence of authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist themes as well as the mobilisation around these ideologies in India's online authoritarian populism, which is understudied. This study looks at a representative sample of pro-BJP tweets from the last week of the 2019 election cycle. The BJP was found to have advanced an ethnoreligious nationalist agenda by employing authoritarian populist tactics. We didn't include conventional media. Social media facilitated a personality cult centred on Modi by enabling direct leader-to-follower communication. Online opinion leaders promoted the most extreme ethnoreligious nationalism, including divisive false information about religion, which are frequently ignored in studies of political campaigns. The democracy in India is at risk from these ideologies and tactics.

Keywords- India, political communication, political campaigning, elections, Internet, social media, Twitter, BJP, Modi.

Introduction

Democracy has been in decline for 15 years, with continued expansion of authoritarian rule and floods of false and misleading information (Repucci & Sipowitz, 2021). Authoritarian expansion is occurring not only in long-term authoritarian states but also in democracies (Repucci & Sipowitz, 2021). Numerous countries have elected authoritarian populist leaders who promote values that threaten the norms of liberal democracy (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The majority of recently failed democracies have been brought down by democratically elected leaders (Diamond, 2015). The health of democracy relies on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens (Kymlicka &

Norman, 1994), with these qualities and attitudes underpinned by access to factual and (relatively) impartial information about politics (Almond & Verba, 1963; Habermas, 1989; Schudson, 2002) and societal structures teaching civic virtues and shared identities (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994). These foundations have been profoundly changed by the transformation of information ecosystems and societal structures precipitated by Internet technologies. The algorithms underpinning online platforms favor extreme, emotive, and divisive content, propelling authoritarian practices (Deibert, 2019). Social media are strategically used by politicians to disseminate right-wing populist discourses (Kreis, 2017). India's Narendra Modi brought the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; Indian People's Party) to power in 2014 on the back of a technologically innovative campaign. The campaign was a pioneer in the use of social media for right-wing populist mobilization, even serving as a case study for Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's 2016 chief campaign strategist (Cesarino, 2020). Despite this and despite Modi's successful reelection campaign in 2019, there has been a lack of attention to India in studies of contemporary authoritarian populism as well as limited attention to India in studies of online political communication. Extant research largely focuses on Modi's or official party's accounts (e.g., Ahmed, Jaidka, & Cho, 2016; Bajaj, 2017; Kanungo, 2015; Pal, Mistree, & Madhani, 2018). This cannot speak to wider discursive ecosystems and the mobilization of citizens behind ideologies. This article focuses on two core concepts: authoritarian populism and ethnoreligious nationalism. Authoritarian populism is a political ideology that combines the threatening other of authoritarianism with the political mobilization and concepts of people and elite of populism (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019). Ethnoreligious nationalism is a nation-building ideology that seeks to impose national majoritarian culture on all those who live in the state (Girvin, 2020). Combining these concepts, this research analyzes the discursive mobilization of Indian citizens behind authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist ideologies on social media by the BJP in the 2019 Indian general election, using a representative sample of Twitter data. It finds discourse exceeded normal partisanship and followed an authoritarian populist playbook, constructing a narrative of threat and a single, charismatic leader to save the people from the fear they live under. These authoritarian populist strategies were targeted at an ethnoreligious nationalist problem and solution that aimed to refashion Indian democracy and nationalism along ethnoreligious lines. This was underpinned by the development of a personality cult around Modi as a devout leader with a direct connection to the people. This party-bypassing leader-people connection as well as extreme and emotive

expressions of threat thrive on social media, with an ecosystem that relies on celebrities and public individuals as mediators, bypassing the role of news media in democratic life. Although the world's largest democracy with the second-largest population of Internet users, India is understudied within political communications. As such, this study adds significantly to our understanding of the global authoritarian populist trend and, in particular, the dangerous intersection of authoritarian populism and ethnoreligious nationalism.

Hindutva, the BJP, and Indian Politics Upon Indian independence in 1947, many predicted democracy would not survive in the vast and diverse nation, with more than 15 major languages, conflicting religions, high levels of illiteracy, widespread poverty, and numerous isolated rural minorities (Guha, 2007). The partition of the British Raj into Pakistan and India created one Muslim and one Hindu majority state. While Pakistan became an Islamic republic, India established a particular brand of secularism. This secularism enshrined multiculturalism, rather than a separation of religion and state, as a cornerstone of democratic India (Jaffrelot, 2011). The constitutional commitment to secularism has been seen as crucial to India's ability to sustain democracy in the face of numerous axes of disparity (Lijphart, 1996). The establishment of Indian democracy and nationalism as explicitly secular is intimately intertwined with India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Indian National Congress (INC) party, which dominated Indian elections for the democracy's first 50 years. However, since 1996, the BJP joined the INC as a credible national party, both leading large coalitions in India's multiparty system. The BJP advances a Hindu nationalist ideology, Hindutva, which rejects secularism and defines national identity in terms of Hindu religious identity (Jaffrelot, 1999). The ideology was first articulated in a 1923 pamphlet that argued that Hindus were not a religious community but a national and racial identity composed of the superimposition of religion, culture, language, and a sacred territory. This was developed in reaction to the pan-Islamic movement and viewed India's Muslim minority as a threat to a disunited Hindu majority (Jaffrelot, 2007). The ideology was put into practice by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organization founded in 1925 to propagate Hindutva and strengthen the Hindu community (Jaffrelot, 2007). The BJP has close links to the RSS, being founded by RSS adherents in 1951 after the RSS was banned following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Modi spent many years working in senior management and organizational positions in the RSS before being assigned by the RSS to the BJP in 1985 (Pathak, 2001). In 1997,

a Supreme Court case paved the way for Hindu nationalist politics when it ruled Hindutva was a way of life synonymous with Indian nationalism, culture, and history, and separate from Hinduism as a religion (Saxena, 2018). This allowed politicians to advocate directly for Hindu votes, previously forbidden under laws to protect secularism (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018). Modern Hindutva attempts to create an ideologically orientated, singular, and infallible history for both Hinduism and India (Udupa, 2016). As an ethnoreligious nationalism, Hindutva is intimately concerned with history, framing issues in historical rather than religious language, thereby casting Hindu mythology as factual history (Jaffrelot, 2008). Online communities play a key role in this ideologically driven historymaking (Udupa, 2016), with the Internet also playing an important role in BJP electioneering. In 2014, social media and, in particular, Twitter were used to circumvent Modi's poor image in the mainstream media (Pal, Chandra, & Vydiswaran, 2016) and rebrand him as the "messiah of New India" (Udupa, 2018, p. 455).

Social Media and Ideology in (Indian) Political Campaigns A great deal of research has focused on the quality of online information and interaction, including demonstrating social media has facilitated echo chambers and filter bubbles (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Garimella, Morales, Gionis, & Mathioudakis, 2018; Pariser, 2012), a proliferation and mainstream influence of hyperpartisan content (Faris et al., 2017; Howard, Bolsover, Kollanyi, Bradshaw, & Neudert, 2017; Zannettou et al., 2017), and widespread opinion manipulation in political events (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Bolsover & Howard, 2019; Chadwick, 2013). The ability to bypass established media and political processes has benefited populist candidates (Kreis, 2017), and the political economies of the platforms favor extreme, emotive, and divisive content (Deibert, 2019). The vast majority of research, however, has focused on the discourse of political leaders and political parties or specific media outlets. Much less attention has been paid to how individuals are mobilizing or are mobilized behind authoritarian populist ideologies in online spaces. This mobilizational quality is particularly important in India, with BJP strategy shifting to an exclusive focus on ethnoreligious mobilization in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Jaffrelot, 1999). Communal and political violence have been major issues, with some arguing "Hindu nationalist organizations deliberately promote communal violence" to build support and advance their interests (Qureshi, 2018, p. v). In 2002, while Modi was chief minister of Gujarat, riots in the state killed at least 1,000 people, mostly Muslims. Modi was accused of initiating and condoning the violence, but he was cleared after a Supreme Court

investigation. However, analysis of 2016 towns and rural areas in Gujarat showed violence was highest in areas where the BJP would face the most intense competition in the coming elections and the BJP's vote share increased the most in areas that had seen the worst violence, potentially suggesting a political strategy behind these violent mobilizations (Dhattiwala & Biggs, 2012). Pal et al. (2018) conducted a long-term analysis of Modi's Twitter account between 2009 and 2015, including the 2012 Gujarat election, which saw the reelection of Modi as chief minister, and the 2014 election, which saw Modi elected as prime minister of India. They found the high point of Hindutva-related content was between August and December 2012, the campaign period of the Gujarat election, and Modi's Twitter account transitioned in January 2013 from Hindutva to more secular Hindu-related messaging as he began to look toward national office and the need to appeal to the wider Indian population. Also examining Modi's Twitter account in the 2014 election, Bajaj (2017) found campaigning focused on development and governance issues, with Hindu nationalist content kept at the margins and Modi praising the party for adhereing to this framing. 2014–2019: A Return of Hindutva Mobilization? Victory in 2014 was the start, rather than the end, of the BJP's campaign. Between 2014 and 2019, the BJP tripled the number of states in which it held power and oversaw an entrenchment of Hindutva ideology in almost every aspect of public life (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018). In contrast to the publicoriented 2014 campaign (Ahmed, Jaidka, & Cho, 2016), after the election, the BJP pursued a "negative strategy of ridiculing and discrediting the opposition and polarizing the public along mostly religious lines" (Mahapatra, 2019, n.p.).

Work by Udupa (2016, 2018) has shown how volunteers, supporters, and regular citizens have been drawn into this discourse in two articles on the motivations and practices of Hindu nationalist volunteers after the 2014 election. In both articles, it is noteworthy how volunteers construct their actions as responses to a problem they are cocreating. Hindutva volunteers on Twitter, who selectively employ facts to construct ideologically driven histories, see their propaganda as part of the fight against propaganda. Similarly, Hindutva trolls see their cause as fighting ideological spin with rationalism: "We have the database of actual facts. Right wing is always right" (Udupa, 2016, p. 220). However, despite the importance of individuals' mobilizations behind ethnoreligious nationalist and authoritarian populist discourses, almost all research on online discourse has focused on Modi's account (Bajaj, 2017; Pal et al., 2018) or official party accounts (Ahmed et al., 2016; Kanungo, 2015). We know much less about how and to what extent supporters are mobilized

or are mobilizing online to advance dangerous ethnoreligious nationalism and authoritarian populism. Analysis of the 2014 election found a BJP focus on development and governance, aided by a masterfully savvy use of technology (Bajaj, 2017; Das & Schroeder, 2020). However, with a perception that the BJP has failed to deliver on development and governance goals (Das & Schroeder, 2020), the party may have turned in 2019 to the religiously polarizing (and potentially deadly) political mobilizations that were seen in campaigns in Gujarat during Modi's time as chief minister. A New York Times article described how, in WhatsApp groups used by the BJP to coordinate and track volunteers, leaders distributed "dark warnings about Hindus being murdered by Muslims—including a debunked BJP claim that 23 activists were killed by jihadists" (Goel, 2018, para. 4). Regional social media were rife with misinformation and political propaganda; much of this information was later distributed on nationwide platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook (Bansal & Poonam, 2018). In addition to blatant falsehoods, social media posts in the lead-up to the election consistently aimed to polarize the electorate along a Hindu-Muslim divide (Bansal & Poonam, 2018). However, this evidence comes from media reports, so there remains more research necessary to understand whether the 2019 election entailed a return of the BJP to overt ethnoreligious nationalism supported with authoritarian populist strategies and the extent to which individuals mobilized or were mobilized on social media to advance these ideologies. As such, this research addresses two linked questions: RQ1: What are the prevalence and sources of authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist discourses? In what ways are different users mobilized and mobilizing around these discourses? RQ2: Did the BJP's campaign exceed normal political partisanship and demonstrate a use of authoritarian populist strategies to advance an ethnoreligious nationalist agenda? Collecting a Representative Sample of Pro-BJP Social Media Discourse As the largest open social media platform, Twitter is the most appropriate venue for studying online public discourse ecosystems. For the 2014 Indian election, it was used much more extensively than Facebook for party campaigning (Kanungo, 2015) and was the most popular social media platform for the consumption of political information (Meti, Khandoba, & Guru, 2015). However, almost all analysis of social media data does not use representative samples, instead focusing on preselected key accounts or preselected hashtags. The first strategy can speak only to the discourse of the preselected users with limited ability to assess citizen resonance (through retweets or replies). The second strategy can provide a representative sample of discourse within preselected hashtags, but focuses on generic topics, missing grassroots-

generated and emergent issues. This project develops a novel strategy to construct a representative sample of new and popular Twitter discourse within a given locality. Using the Twitter API, the top 50 trending topics in all 22 places in India for which Twitter collates trending topics (including one for the entire country) are collected every 10 minutes. At the same time, the 100 most recent posts in each of these trending topics are collected, producing a data set representative of all discourse in trending topics in India during the study period. This generates very large amounts of data, necessitating a relatively short analysis period. Thus, this project focuses on the final week of the election: May 13–19. The election was conducted in seven phases, with different states and regions voting between April 11 and May 19. Results are not counted or announced until after all votes are made. As such, this research can speak to discourse only in the final week of the election within Twitter trending topics. Most research privileges long time periods over wide reach, focusing on very limited cases over long timescales (e.g., Bajaj, 2017), or limited cases over medium timescales (e.g., Gul et al., 2016). To complement existing efforts, this research focuses on the analysis of a sample truly representative of online discourse over a weeklong period. Across the week, 2,786,968 tweets were collected in 2,060 trends. Three coders coded all trends to identify those related to politics. Percentage agreement was 95%, with a kappa of 90%; 865 political trends were identified, with a total of 1,470,493 tweets collected in these trends. Two thousand tweets from these political trends were randomly selected and coded to ascertain whether they concerned politics and, if so, whether they were pro-BJP. Percentage agreement for political tweets was 94% with a kappa of 51%, and percentage agreement for partisan affiliation was 91% with a kappa of 51%. This identified 1,808 political tweets, of which 391 were pro-BJP, providing a representative sample of pro-BJP tweets on Twitter in India during the final week of the 2019 election.

made by political entities. This demonstrates that half of pro-BJP discourse is invisible to research focusing only on the posts of political parties and politicians (even if all participating politicians and political parties are included). For authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist discourse, an inductive framing analysis is performed, informed by relevant theory. Populism's core themes are of an antagonist relationship between a pure people and a corrupt elite and that politics should be an expression of the direct will of the people (Mudde, 2007). Authoritarianism is characterized by limited political pluralism and the neutralization of political opponents (Linz, 2000). This is combined with emotional appeals to generic values: the need for strength,

conformity, and loyalty to protect against easily recognizable social problems threatening disorder and instability (Linz, 1964; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In authoritarian populism, the people and elite of populist ideology are combined with the threatening other of authoritarian discourse (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019). Unlike regular authoritarianism, which has limited mobilization, authoritarian populism mobilizes individuals through the coalition of a strong, charismatic leader and key groups in society (Gasiorowski, 1990). From this literature, seven themes of authoritarian populism emerge: corrupt elite and pure people; politics as a direct expression of the will of the people; problems with democracy/pluralism; political legitimacy based on appeals to emotion; the need for strength to combat easily recognizable social problems; a single charismatic leader; and political mobilization. This research also includes an eighth theme, ethnoreligious nationalism, an ideology that seeks to redefine the nation and nationality in terms of ethnicity and religion. Less theoretical work exists on ethnoreligious nationalism, as nationalism was long seen as explicitly secular (Smith, 2009). However, research on Hindutva as an ethnoreligious nationalism has theorized discursive strategies, including ideologically driven history making (Udupa, 2016) and the art of grievance (Jaffrelot, 2008). Based on these eight themes, an inductive framing analysis is undertaken identifying the frames through which these themes surface in pro-BJP discourse (Table 1). Each frame is aligned to the theme to which it is most closely related. This breakdown is provided as a heuristic, rather than a fixed, categorization, as frames may overlap multiple themes. This is not an exhaustive categorization of all frames in pro-BJP online discourse but only those that align with the themes of authoritarian populism and ethnoreligious nationalism. Given its relevance in studies of the 2014 election, instances of a development frame are also coded.

Conclusion

Regular BJP supporters are mobilized to propagate the full expression these messages (as the data set is overwhelmingly constituted of retweets by users rather than examining data at the site of posting). No evidence of retweeting as critique was found in the data set and, thus, it is presumed that this forwarding is evidence of support of this construction of problem and solution. In their own posts, regular supporters focus on Modi and their relationship to Modi in a way that bypasses the BJP. In structure as well as form, therefore, pro-BJP discourse in the final week of the 2019 election campaign significantly deviates from what would be considered healthy within partisan democratic discourse. The structures, formats, and political economies of social media platforms,

like Twitter, favor these political ideologies and strategies over the collaborative, respectful, fact-based communications that support liberal democracies. Social media allow new types of campaigning and messaging that directly connect International Journal of Communication 16(2022) Indian Democracy Under Threat 1961 leaders with citizens (facilitating populism) and the bypassing of traditional media, which provide checks on one-sided, incorrect, and extremist messaging. The lack of traditional media in pro-BJP messaging and the 50% of posts made by nonpolitical entities suggest Twitter is not just a space in which existing discourses are reproduced, but a place in which ideologies are articulated, developed, and advanced. Research using social media data will always struggle to show that these online discourses have offline implications. However, it is clear that the discourses uncovered here are mirrored in wider society; 55% of Indians believe autocratic rule would be a good way of running a country (higher than any other nation surveyed) and list the top three domestic issues as crime, terrorism, and corruption (Stokes, Manevich, & Chwe, 2017). Although this study can speak only to pro-BJP discourse in trending topics on Twitter in India in the final week of the 2019 election campaign, it is clear that within this population an authoritarian populist campaign centered on familiar themes of political corruption, threat, and a single, charismatic leader was being used to advance an ethnoreligious nationalist agenda. This significantly exceeded ideas of Hindutva as a culture and way of life, separate from religion, and posed a danger to the secular foundations of Indian democracy as well as its religious, and particularly Muslim, minorities.

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$%&'(#)- #$*+$#:8>%#4,2, 3.#!"#?!#@(#!8;%#)"#A/8%#9=,%+#+%8;-#6B, >"#)@(#?/)"#?9-#:C%8-#)- #4,2 DDD [Those who

were born with a silver spoon and who made silver spoons for themselves by doing politics in the

name of the poor, and who still consider the public as their slaves, they can never work to

advance you. Only this watchman can do this work: PM #MyVoteToModi] [Video attached]

[Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1127507918159368196

BJP. [@BJP4India]. (2019b, May 15). !E#.%FG#+H#2)#?I/(2E#A4J)%.(#)"#6(#5G%G#86K#4+,-9%, >6%&#E%+%5G#+%8>(#L);8-#M.#

+H#!(#.6%#6"9%, G-#A&'%!%#,9%8%#+=4N),#86K#60O#/(2+#P(#@narendramodi #AbkiBaar300Paar [In a state where

only an IPS officer will not get justice, it is not difficult to imagine the fear of a common man

living there: PM Shri @narendramodi #ThisTime300Seats] [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from

https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1128646356002791424

BJP. [@BJP4India]. (2019c, May 15).)%&Q-E#A:#'-RS"6#)%#)%8T8#@(#<U+#).8%#$%6;(#60V#)%&Q-E#/UW.:%X7, ?;&L)G7#3.#Y8)- #

E+WZ)7, 8[E4,G7#3.#Y56H#<%'#/%8(#'-8-#>%,7#)"#<=,(#\T]#'-8%#$%6;(#60V#@%!/%#^56H#_E%#);I#).8-#86K#'-9(V#6+#8I#.(4;,

8I DDD [Congress now also wants to abolish the law of sedition. Congress wants to give openly

complete freedom to stone pelters, terrorists and their supporters, Naxalites and those who give

them fertilizers and water. The BJP will not allow them to do this at all. We are following a new

custom, a new policy: PM Modi #ThisTime300Seats] [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from

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BJP. [@BJP4India]. (2019d, May 16). '('(#:&9%,#)- #:`7#3.#:&9%,#)a#:-b]G7#)"#:%;#:%;#+H#!-,#@-!#'-;(#6BV#,-L)8#c=E/0bdG7#

3.#;e).7#)"#Y5678-#<=,(#\T]#'-#.<(#60O#/(2+#+"'(##ApnaModiAayega [Didi sends the children of Bengal and

daughters of Bengal to jail in the matter. But they have given free rein to infiltrators and

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[When you press the lotus button, it will take you five seconds, but I will spend my next five

years for you. When you press the lotus button, not only will you press your finger but you will

also press the trigger to shoot terrorists in the chest: PM Modi #Country'sPrideModi] [Video

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)%+#).;-#12#!8;%#)- #L',#+H#!96#:8%I#60V#+"'(#8#A/8(#\4>#)- #4,2#/0'%#1?#60,8#A/8(#\4>#)-DDD [Our image has not

been created by any newspaper or PR agency. We have made a place in the hearts of the people

by digging the soil, working on the land. Modi was neither born for his image nor lived for his

image. I was born to keep the shining image of my country in the world: PM #TheCountryIsWithModi] [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from

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BJP Maharashtra. [@BJP4Maharashtra]. (2019, May 13). ?!%'(#)- #:%'#55 E%,#;)#2)#/b.>%.#8-#'-R#)"#d9%#60V#[G%#A:#

@(#?/#Y8)"#d98-#)%#+i)%#'-8%#$%6;-#6B?: /(2+#@narendramodi #DeshModiKeSaath [For 55 years after

independence, one family has cheated the country. Do you still want to give them a chance to

cheat?: PM @narendramodi TheCountryIsWithModi] [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved

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6"#.6%#60V#)%R(#:",-, +"'(#'":%.%V##DeshKaGauravModi [With the orders and blessings of Shiva, the

dream of renovation of Kashi is coming true. Kashi said, Modi again. #Country'sPrideModi] [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1129311605152346112