Populism, Religion, and the Media in India

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This article explores populism in the context of Hindu nationalism in India. It begins with a critical interrogation of the meaning of *populism* given that it is a multiaccentual word that is often used to describe a variety of extrademocratic tendencies in the governance of a nation. Whether populism remains a latent tendency within all forms of politics or whether it is an aberration remains contested. The article explores the specific forms of mediated populism in contemporary India that unabashedly appeals to the moral rightness of Hindu nationalism and majoritarian rights and identities. Although populism is often expressed in cultural-symbolic forms, the article makes a case for the need to recognize the real material impact of populism on the lives of minorities such as Muslims and lower castes in India. The article concludes with an interrogation of populism and argues that its use to describe the politics of Hindu nationalism could be a disservice that detracts from naming the reality of incipient expressions of fascism in India.

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Populism celebrates "the people" as the source of legitimacy: political, religious, cultural, and economic. Although the "people" certainly are invoked as the basis for "democracy," rule by people, populism as a political project involves both overt and covert attempts to break down the status quo and, in particular, rule by elites who are seen to be complicit in maintaining power imbalances and perpetuating divides in society. In other words, populism's objectives are to recalibrate the trajectory of a political system such as democracy or, for that matter, any other type of political system in line with the views of people defined as such by nationalist, religious-nationalist, welfarist politics often (but not always) linked to the majority. So, I would like to begin this article by stating that populism is a type of discourse that can be invoked and that can be made to fit into any political ideology, hence the Nazi populism associated with leaders ranging from Hitler in Germany to the welfarist populism associated with Eva Perón in Argentina and South Asian leaders such as Indira Gandhi in India and Srimao Bandaranike in then-Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), to the revolutionary populism of leaders such as Evo Morales in Bolivia and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, to the antiestablishment and the White majority-inclined political populism associated with Donald Trump in the United States. Canovan (1981), in her book *Populism*, describes seven forms of populism, including farmers' populism, peasants' populism, intellectuals' populism, populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism, and politicians' populism. She distinguishes between the populism from below with types of top-down populism, although she refrains from

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defining what could be considered a common core of family resemblances such as those Martin E. Marty and Scott E. Appleby (1994) attempt to delineate in their monumental work *Fundamentalism Observed*, which was itself part of the Fundamentalism Project edited by Marty and Appleby between 1994 and 2004. This vacuum has resulted in the term *populism* remaining inherently unstable, invoked by all and sundry to describe politicians who go against the grain and against mainstream economic, social, and cultural programs that are seen to pander to the interests of the status quo.

Laclau's (2005) work *On Populist Reason* attempts to provide a discursive understanding of populism by describing it as counter to institutional, dominant politics. In his view, populism does have the potential to recalibrate liberal democracies that have become institutionalized and have lost touch with the people, although in contrast there are other theorists (Arato, 2015) who see populism, especially the kind that is spearheaded by a charismatic, demagogic leader, as a potentially divisive, dangerous project pitting ethnic and racial groups, the haves and have-nots, and majority and minority religions against one another. In such cases, the recalibration of democracy is problematic given that it is based on appeals to specific segments of the population and not to the entire nation. Populism is the result of a variety of equivalences, a bringing together of seemingly varied interests and hitherto politically unacknowledged issues held by people into a manifesto for social change. There is a political logic to populism that involves individuals or collectives, making homogenous what in reality is a heterogeneous variety of issues and concerns. This shaping by what Laclau refers to as an "empty signifier" refers to the forever shifting terrain of populist politics highlighted by the impossibility of welding disparate interests into a whole. This has recently been highlighted by the inability of the European Union as a union to respond to calls for help and support a member state, Italy, which was the first country in the European Union to be ravaged by COVID-19. The signifier is not completely empty because its meanings are temporary and dependent on the trajectory of populist reasoning at any given moment in time. It is empty because it is difficult to pin down. Populism is dependent on a political and legitimacy crisis of the dominant order that is unable to reconcile divisions and divides, satisfy demands, or provide solutions that are broadly acceptable. To Laclau, populism and institutionalized politics are always in tension given that both are unable to practice a politics that makes a difference to the lives of large majorities.

There is a sense in which populism in the context of 21st-century liberal politics is an answer to a failed model of dominant politics based on two-party or, for that matter, coalitional politics. At the same time, populist strategies are followed by dominant politics associated with both the right and the left and their attempts to address the interests of majority communities in any given nation state. This could take the form of the religion of the majority taking precedence over constitutional secularism, as is the case in India in the context of the current political dispensation. That populism can be used to trump constitutional secularism indicates the fragile nature of contemporary politics. This has vividly been demonstrated in Trump's United States and Johnson's United Kingdom, two nations whose political architectures have been honed over a number of centuries but where serious doubts have been raised on the robustness of these architectures under sustained onslaught from populist politicians. Arguably, populism's success in liberal democracies is dependent on whether or not the bureaucracy or those involved in the everyday running of the state such as the civil service remain independent from, and are in a position to resist, populist politics and politicians.

As Yasmeen Serhan (2020) explains,

Even as definitions of populism have developed, many people are still none the wiser about what the term means. It has taken on a versatile quality—one that can be applied to politicians as varied as the Netherlands' Geert Wilders on the far right and France's Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the far left. . . . The more populism gets invoked in these ways, though, the more muddled its definition becomes. And the more muddled it becomes, the less useful it ultimately is. After all, what's the point of invoking populism without a concerted effort to apply it consistently? Lacking a clear attempt to better define such terms, we risk stripping them of their meaning entirely. (para. 3)

From the above brief analysis of populism, it is clear that it remains a messy concept given that it approximates at best a political tendency that can animate the entire spectrum of dominant politics from right to left. If Trump is a populist, so is Chavez, and it is its virality and ability to inhabit all political forms that makes it a frustrating concept to deal with. The jury is still out on whether populism is a tendency or strain that is omnipresent in dominant politics or whether it is an aberration that destabilizes dominant politics but is not germane to that politics. A further complication is populism's representativeness. "The people," often invoked by the populist, is difficult to place because it too is, as Laclau (2005) would call it, an empty signifier. The attempt to weld together certain "people" is characteristic of populist politicians who divide and rule. And yet, arguably, all political systems divide and rule. It is often a matter of degree. Hegemonic attempts to divide and rule can be considered populist because power is used unilaterally to achieve goals and reinforce specific interests, be it of a religious, ethnic, economic, social, political, or cultural kind.

Populism in India

To move from this cursory understanding of populism to the case of populism in India is an equally difficult challenge. The key question is whether politics in independent India has always maintained a populist character. Except for the immediate period after independence, when a freshly minted constitutional mandate explicitly created the basis for an inclusive and welfarist, dirigiste economy, successive governments beginning with Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party then and Narendra Modi and the Bharitiya Janata Party (BJP) now have been explicitly populist. Both federal and state governments, too, have followed the populist route, although the nature of populism in India has varied. Whereas the populism associated with Modi today is based on a charismatic leader and an ideological turn toward Hindu majoritarianism at the expense of other minority religions, especially Islam, regional leaders in India have embraced an economic populism aimed at shoring up support among disenfranchised populations. In other words, populism in India has been of varied hue and followed distinct pathways within the "democratic" framework of governance that has largely been followed by successive Indian governments, with the exception of the Emergency (1975–1977), a two-year interregnum of despotic rule by Indira Gandhi and some would argue the totalitarian impulses of the present regime in power.

The key issue is populism's forms: whether it has been largely banal and benign, or whether it has been used to systematically re-create the basis for Indian politics and, in that process, undermine the constitution, its guarantees, and India's tryst with secularism as a fundamental source of Indian identity. Jaffrelot and Tillin (2017), in their chapter on populism in India in the *Oxford Book of Populism*, refer to three types of populism in India: socioeconomic and agrarian populism associated with two prime ministers,

Indira Gandhi and Charan Singh; and Hindu nationalist populism associated with the chauvinist regional party, the Shiv Sena in the state of Maharashtra, and the Hindu nationalist BJP and its current leader Narendra Modi; the economic populism associated with regional parties in South India that is based on extending largesse—economic, technological, white goods, laptops, cycles, reservations in public sector jobs, and so forth—to lower caste groups that form a strong electoral base.

Populism as the basis for patron–client relationships needs further research as it can, in the context of unequal development and an unequal society, lead to bridging some gaps (e.g., the digital divide). Although the intent is often noble, the problem with this form of populism is that quite often free laptops are given to children who live in environments that do not have strong infrastructure (e.g., electricity supply), a reality that I observed while conducting some very cursory fieldwork in 2016 among the Irulas, a "tribal" community in South India, mainly in the state of Tamil Nadu. Irula children, in the absence of access to regular electricity supplies to their homes, were forced to be "creative" and learned to "tap" electricity from hubs/boxes in their vicinity to charge their laptops. Leela Prasad (2015), writing in *The Indian Express* on the culture of freebies in Tamil Nadu, highlights expenditures by the two main parties:

> DMK spent over Rs 3,340 crore on 1,52,80,000 14-inch TV sets with each costing an average of Rs 2,456. They were distributed in five phases between 2006–10. AIADMK spent Rs 1,200 crore in 2012–13 on procuring 7,84,000 laptops for students and is expected to spend Rs 10,200 crore in the next five years. On mixies, grinders and table fans, Rs 2,000 crore was spent by the ruling AIADMK. 3.5 million beneficiaries were recipients of this scheme. (paras. 2–4)

Arguably, however, this type of populism does have the potential to contribute to the leveling of economic means, although it is, more often than not, linked to a short-term electoral strategy embraced by political parties.

Modi's Brand of Populism

Populism, of course, is not just a political strategy, but its success is often dependent on its intense mediation—by charismatic political leaders like Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi—and on the role played by the media. In the case of Indira Gandhi, whereas state media were used as a tool for government propaganda, private media and in particular the press were willing to critique her policies and many journalists were imprisoned during the Emergency for doing so. Modi's brand of populism, however, is an exercise in redefining the very identity of India from a secular nation to one that is explicitly Hindu. This project has been made possible precisely because of the following circumstances and actions: first, the inability of the Congress Party to rise above its dynastic politics and rein in the corruption linked to some of its coalitional partners. Second is the steady Hinduization of politics in India that has been made possible by the rise of radical Hinduism supported by the Sangh Parivar (family), a family of right-wing religious nationalist groups inclusive of the Rashtra Swayamsevak Sangh, a cadre-based, India-wide organization; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a group with strong external links to diaspora Hindus; the Bajrang Dal, a group that is much like Mussolini's Brownshirts; along with the BJP and an India-wide network of right-wing Hindu organizations. Third is the close-to-complete Hinduization of mainstream media in India with some very

important exceptions such as NDTV and online portals such as *The Wire* and *Scroll*. Fourth are major attempts to control the judiciary, the educational system, and allied institutions; fifth are major investments by the BJP's IT wing in social media propaganda, Modi's use of Twitter along with a vast array of online Hindu warriors consisting of websites, influencers, trolls, revisionist history sites, and anti-Islamic sites, some of which are actively supported by the BJP. Sixth is the use of the judiciary, the police, and repressive laws to shut down dissent, threaten intellectuals, take people to court, bully minority rights advocates, lynch beef-eating Muslims and lower castes, and assassinate rationalists and anyone seen to be complicit with an anti-Hindu agenda. Bhat and Chadha (2020), writing in the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, refer to the role played by populist right-wing portals such as *OpIndia*, akin to the role played by the Breitbart News Network in the United States, which is explicitly involved in contesting the alleged left-wing bias of liberal media:

> Since OpIndia.com and other similar sites are followed/endorsed on social media by Prime Minister Modi, his cabinet colleagues, as well as activists associated with the Hindu right, they are able to play a significant role in normalizing right-wing populist ideas, especially as they relate to the mainstream press. (pp. 177–178)

One of the key features of populist leaders is their attempt to disintermediate and make direct connections with the audiences (Sinha, 2017; Wojczewski, 2019). This has been a feature of both Trump and Modi, two populist leaders who have used Twitter in particular and other social media platforms to communicate their plans, achievements, critiques, and comments to their followers. Unlike Trump, who continues to be faced by legacy media opposition, Modi's politics is conducted in a hybrid media environment that is, for the most part, pliant and supportive of his government. This means of communication is also a means of legitimization because it offers opportunities for such leaders to communicate with their "people," to get their endorsement and their imprimatur. Personalized communications via social media connect to personal media frames, thereby achieving high levels of congruity (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Buchel, 2017). This type of communication offers simple solutions to complex problems, and in a world characterized by a surfeit of information, it does offer some certainty. Jamie Bartlett, (2018) writing in *The Guardian*, reflects on the predisposition of audiences to connect to simple solutions offered by populist politicians in an information-heavy environment:

> The cultural predisposition is therefore to rely on gut and heuristics—to react without reflection, to filter, to ignore, to simplify, to caricature. Being constantly distracted must make us less capable of handling complicated, nuanced ideas and arguments. A distracted nation is one that prefers emotional certainties to the grey areas. (para. 6)

Modi's social media strategy has certainly contributed to the building of his image as a strong leader, although such strategies work best in a context characterized by the relative absence of economic or other types of crisis. Populist leaders simply have to invest in identifying "enemies" of the nations, be they internal or external agents. In the case of Modi's India, Muslims and minorities, Pakistan, and recently COVID-19 and China have provided fodder for his more avid supporters (Bhakts, the faithful). In the context of the mishandling of COVID-19, we should expect investments in the spectacular as a means of reinforcing populism, the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. However, it is possible that the inability to deal with

the economic and health crises associated with COVID-19 could result in populist messages becoming less attractive. The growth of counterdiscourses also has the potential to contribute to a more robust and consistent interrogation of populist logic. Surely, there are limits to how long one can demonize minorities, especially in contexts in which failing public health systems highlight the failures of government.

Religion and Populism In India

Key to this populism is major investment in a Hindu enchantment project involving the move from mythological to factual Hinduism, along with the vaticanization of Hinduism—an attempt to shape an amorphous, regional, and local deity-specific religion into a centrally organized religion with Ram as its chief god—and investments in the Vedic sciences and in a number of Indian cultural initiatives linked to yoga, Ayurveda, vegetarianism, and other practices. The ultimate aim of such investments is to transform Hinduism into a religion perfect for contemporary civilization and a global way of life that is also mirrored in India becoming a global economic and military superpower. These twin objectives define the politics of muscular Hinduism associated with Modi. Given the totalizing objectives of this project, one issue that needs to be dealt with is whether this is indeed a case of populism or religious totalitarianism or whether it is a combination of both. Modi's brand of religious politics and that associated with the Sangh Parivar has been described as fascist. Although India has not been witness to genocidal politics on a scale that the Nazis unleashed on minorities, there have been riots, lynchings, and burnings of Muslims and lower castes, as well as disproportionate incarceration over their often spuriously labeled "antinationalism" or because they hurt the sentiments of the majority community and rhetorical registers that simply have been fascist. The Indian activist and writer Arundhati Roy (2015) has written and commented on this "Deep State" with its many ways of silencing dissent and dissenters.

Caterina Kinnvall (2019), in an article on Hindutva and Modi, makes links between populism and ontological insecurity. In her words, "To take an ontological security perspective on populism, emotions and (in)security means exploring both the structural and affective reasons behind such anxieties and fears, while also taking into account the emotional responses to these feelings" (pp. 284–285). Although there certainly have been attempts to marshal majoritarian sentiments and emotions to counter such insecurities, one of the issues that needs to be dealt with is the nature and extent to which such insecurities have been deliberately manufactured and mediatized. In other words, although ontological insecurities are experienced by most people, how solutions to such insecurities become the basis for populist politics remains an issue that requires more research. The Muslim as a threat to the Hindu nation and to the representatives of Hinduism is, in my way of thinking, a manufactured ontological insecurity given that most people living in India are not threatened by their Muslim neighbors or the Muslim way of life in their daily lives. In any case, most Muslims in India live in enclaves; although they certainly are seen as the Other, there is little evidence to show that the materialities of Muslim life affect Hindus and their ways of life. They have been eating beef for centuries, as have the lower castes and Dalits. The manner in which beef-eating has been transformed into the basis for ontological insecurity related to the future of Hinduism in India would suggest that such anxieties have been deliberately construed to become a key antagonism and trope linked to the overall demonization of the Muslim as the Other. The fact that over the last two years, a handful of state governments has rejected the BJP would seem to indicate that there is a need to differentiate between the

ontological insecurities faced by people involved in surviving on a day-to-day basis and those insecurities that are largely external and ideological in nature.

As Zuquete (2017) argues, the relationship between populism and religion has two dimensions: first, the politicization of religion, and second, the sacralization of politics. The politicization of religion has to some extent been with us from time immemorial, and this is best exemplified by the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the state in Southern Europe and Islam in numerous countries around the world including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Brunei. The sacralization of politics needs to be seen as counter to the rationalization of politics and its role in the creation and preservation of the secular foundations of the state and its futures. In the words of Zuquete, the sacralization of politics

> constitutes and provides an intimate relationship with the sacred: the people is transfigured and consecrated, its enemies combated as the embodiment of evil on earth, and politics is interpreted, experienced and felt like a transcendental cause. . . . The sacralised politics of religious reenchants, therefore, the political landscape. (para. 17)

Zuquete's description of the sacralization of religion is interesting, although arguably he does not account for the fact that the "people" as a descriptor is highly contested. No political leader, including Trump, has any monopoly over a word that is highly contested. At best, it can refer to those who are affected by a certain politics, who in the case of India see the battle as one between Hindus and Muslims and who see majoritarian futures as a natural precursor to *Ramrajya* (Rule of Ram). However, Hindus themselves are divided over the morality and legitimacy of this hardline approach taken by Hindu nationalists. Their Achilles heel—caste—remains a formidable obstacle to the project of the Hindu nation despite their best efforts to recruit Dalits and lower castes to their cause. Their attempt to create a centralized version of Hinduism, and to clean the many rituals associated with the Little traditions of Hinduism, have been resisted, although their attempts to make Hinduism a hegemonic religion remains a "live" project, and that is key to the identity of this muscular form of Hinduism. Also the attempt to blame India's woes entirely on the Congress Party dynasty, although certainly enjoying political traction, is not a long-term strategy given that the BJP and its allies have also been accused of corruption and nepotism, and its national "shock and awe" strategies such as demonetization and the COVID-19 shutting down of the nation that adversely affected migrant labor remain blind spots that have attracted critique from within their family of like-minded Hindu nationalist organizations. In other words, the discursive strategies that have been adopted by the Hindu right in India have not led to expected results. Their discursive manufacture of the "people," a strategy that Laclau (2005) describes as critical to the project of populism, has not been entirely successful given that the demonization of the Other—in this case, the Gandhi family—is wearing thin just as the demonization of Obama appeals to only the most hardline of Trump's supporters. COVID-19 shutdowns arguably could not have been helped, although more generous deadlines and the availability of public transport could have helped migrants get back to their respective states before the shutdown could take effect. Demonetization, which was also foisted on the nation with little notice ostensibly to tackle the hoarding of cash, in hindsight is now recognized as a monetary disaster that led to small retailers and workers in the informal wage economy (who have been traditional supporters of the BJP) losing income, savings, and their means of livelihood.

The Mediatizations of Populism

One of the features of contemporary populism is the mediatization of politics: politics becoming like the media in terms of its institutions, distribution of content, and relationship to its audiences. In other words, the substantive core at the heart of populist politics is intensely mediated and mediatized. To some extent, this is not at all surprising given correspondences between media logics and populist politics. As Silvio Waisbord (2018)points out, "The media logic is characterised by spectacularisation, personalisation, sensationalism, tabloidization conflict-centred discourse and simplified rhetoric—all common features in populism" (pp. 226–227).

In the case of Modi, as in the case of Trump, this mediatization is a deliberate strategy whose frameworks are shaped, maintained, and controlled by the BJP's IT, cellular, and public relations operations, which include Modi's Twitter strategy, his highly choreographed appearances on radio programs such as *Mann ki Baat* (*Heart Talk*), his appearances in public-sector advertisements, and his complete absence from any media scrutiny. Modi does not give interviews, and when he does appear in the media, it is almost always to announce a top-down solution, thus reinforcing his image as a man of action who gets his work done. The fact that there is absolutely no accountability does indicate that one of the world's largest media networks across all legacy media has largely become populist in orientation and has bought shares in the Modi dream factory.

A sting operation, conducted by journalists from the media organization Cobrapost who posed as representatives of a wealthy Hindu monastery willing to pay large amounts of money to media organizations for supporting Modi and discrediting the opposition Congress Party prior to the 2018 elections, netted some of the biggest legacy media in India. Those implicated organizations included *The Times of India*, *The Indian Express*, and *India Today*, although there was hardly any debate or discussions on this in the media (see Rowlatt, 2018). Nikhil Inamdar (2019), writing in the oppositional online portal *Quartz India*, highlights some of the ways in which the current government brings errant media in line:

> Raiding news channels (such as NDTV), boycotting prime-time debates, and stopping government advertising—a significant source of revenue for the industry—have been among the common tactics used by the Modi regime. Unwillingness to toe the line has often led to high-profile editorial sackings. (para.15)

Numerous journalists have been jailed or harassed for critiquing government policies or the actions of politicians and the police. Both Media One and Asianet News, two satellite news channels, were temporarily blocked for airing news critical of the police handling of the Citizens Amendment Act-related demonstrations by minority groups, especially Muslims in New Delhi. This act gives persecuted non-Muslims from neighboring countries abutting India the right to sanctuary in India.

Along with the National Registry of Citizens meant to weed out illegal Muslims in India, the creation of detention centers for undocumented people, and stripping Kashmir of its autonomy—projects overseen by Home Minister Amit Shah, a vociferously anti-Muslim Hindu and Modi ally, both hailing from the state of Gujarat—there has been a systematic attempt to erase India's age-old relationship with Islam, ramp up the

narrative of persecution during Muslim–Mughal rule, and marginalize and vilify Muslims in India. Such initiatives suggest that Modi's populism is tinged with fascist overtones, and there is copious evidence of right-wing Hindu politicians using the language of the "Final Solution" to describe their fix for the Muslim problem. The fact that legacy media now report hate speech with scarcely any critique or censure suggests that such speech has become normalized. The close-to-complete Hinduization of most state institutions including the judiciary has meant that minorities affected by the politics of Hindu nationalism have little recourse to justice. Moderate Hinduism has been sidelined, and their spokespersons along with anyone labeled "antinational" have been persecuted. Such developments suggest that the word populism, used to describe politics in the context of India, needs to be used with caution given clear evidence of totalitarian tendencies, actions, and enabling environments supportive of Hindu majoritarianism. Given the rise of similar regimes throughout the world, it is important that populism as an analytical descriptor of a type of politics is interrogated and invested with the meaning that it deserves.

A Material Reading of Populism

My readings of populism indicate that most understandings of this term stem from a culturalist reading. Populism is quite often seen as an issue to do with identity—us and them—a response to secularism, support for tradition and traditional institutions linked to religion, and in recent years, as a response to the threat posed by Islam. Although these readings do highlight core features of populism and populist rhetoric, I strongly believe that the material impact of populist politics also requires substantive academic attention. In the context of India, the project of Hindu nationalism is not just an attempt to corral the Hindu faithful into making Hindu India, this project also has real material consequences for minorities, especially the Muslim poor and lower castes. Although Hindu nationalism is largely a Brahminic project, it is operationalized through the active marginalization of minorities, the use of intersectional power such as caste and class to deny minorities employment in the public and private sectors, occasional riots that target minority groups and lead to the destruction of business properties, the use of rape and lynchings to cow down dispensable groups and close options for the development of minority groups, increased surveillance of minorities, targeting minority business for takeover by Hindu groups, and refusal of doctors to treat Muslim patients and schools to encourage Muslim children. This list is effectively endless and points to the systematic material discriminations against minorities. With the enactment of the Citizens Amendment Act and National Registry of Citizens, accompanied by genocidal rhetoric from the BJP parliamentarians, the making of the second-class Indian is a project that is "live" and "active." It is especially real in the BJP-dominated states in North India in particular, but it is an all-India reality. The fact that those involved in the violence against minorities have largely escaped punishment, and in some cases have been rewarded for their efforts, while individuals belonging to minorities have been jailed, and often on trumped-up charges, suggest that the term populism has limited explanatory power. The political economy of populist, religious nationalism as it impacts minorities in India simply has to be investigated, exposed, and contested.

Social Media and Populist Politics In India

Political economy also enables us to have clearer understandings of the compact between Hindu nationalism and new media, in particular Facebook. Mohammed Ali's (2020) article in *Wired* focuses on the muscular Hinduism of the Bajrang Dal, a vigilante group associated with the Sangh Parivar, and in particular

the social media-fueled rise of a young leader, Premi, whose beating of a Muslim went viral. He was briefly jailed, but was released by Delhi only to find himself a minor social media celebrity. The article highlights Premi's gradual rise in the Bajrang Dal hierarchy and his eventual joining with the BJP. The article highlights the use of WhatsApp, a messaging platform owned by Facebook, by the Bajrang Dal: "What seemed very real was that even if social media platforms hadn't created the mass delusions of Hindu extremism, they had provided a shockingly efficient infrastructure for their spread" (Ali, 2020, para. 104).

India has 400 million WhatsApp users and 260 million Facebook users, and it is the largest global market for both platforms. Facebook has come under heavy fire in India for uneven enforcement of its community standards against hate speech and misinformation. A report by the nongovernmental organization Equality Labs (2019) found that Islamophobic posts often stayed up on the platform. In a particularly chilling example, Equality Labs found a huge number of Indian Facebook posts targeting Muslim Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, who had already been the victims of one social media-fueled ethnic cleansing in their home country. The Indian pages called the Rohingya "cockroaches" and posted fake videos that purported to show them cannibalizing Hindus—clear violations of Facebook's standards. Ali's (2020) article, based on his own encounters with Bajrang Dal activist Premi, offers an insight into the complicities among the BJP, Prime Minister Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, and new media, and presents consequences for Muslims in India.

A similar first-hand account of the use of new media by Hindutva groups in India—in particular, the ABVP, a student union affiliated with the Sangh Parivar, based on ethnographic work over a number of years— is by Sahana Udupa (2019). Udupa's article on new media and the normalization of Hindu nationalist imaginary through humorous Internet memes in India highlights the textual, visual communications of "fun" as one aspect of the project of normalizing Hindu nationalism. Udupa describes the great variety of platforms used by the Hindu right, by the BJP's IT cell, but also by multifarious groups and individuals linked to the Hindu right:

> In the years after electoral victory and in preparation for the 2019 national elections, the campaign-style management of online media by the Modi team accelerated on various social networking platforms including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and the short video sharing app TikTok, pushing the appeal beyond middle class supporters. Twitter has remained an important platform for the ideological work, but the party's social media presence is further diversified with the vast expansion of the messenger service WhatsApp after 2014, continued popularity of Facebook, and the emergence of TikTok. (p. 3147)

After border skirmishes between India and China in June 2020 and the spread of COVID-19, TikTok was banned because of its "Chinese" origins.

Facebook's links with Indian PM Modi have been recounted in an article titled "Did Facebook in India Help BJP and Modi? Or Was It Vice Versa?" by Cyril Sam and veteran journalist Paranjoy Guha Thakurtha (2018) in the online portal *Newsclick*. Their article highlights Mark Zuckerberg's visit to India in 2014; his felicitation of the prime minister at Facebook's headquarters in Menlo Park (CA) in 2015; the close to 270 million users of WhatsApp and Facebook in India, making it their largest user base in any single country; close correspondences between the BJP's IT cell and key functionaries at Facebook India; and the

political uses of disinformation on these platforms. These correspondences have also been highlighted in an article in *The Wall Street Journal* written by Newley Purnell and Jeff Horowitz (2020) that alleges complicities between Facebook's most senior executive Ankhi Das and the circulation of Hindutva hate speech over this platform. The fact that the government of India has consistently made over the last decade the most requests among any country to censor content on Facebook, especially content critical of the government and the "'defamation' of religion," in particular, their brand of Hinduism—close to 10,000 requests in 2017 and Facebook's compliance (see Ramanayake, 2018)—suggests the need for more critical scrutiny of the relationship between tech giants such as Facebook and dominant politics in India.

Right-Wing Populism and Media Control

Rasmus Neilsen (2017), writing on the threats facing journalists in India, cites five salient concerns: (1) attacks on journalists by politicians often belonging to the ruling party using demeaning, portmanteau descriptors such as "presstitutes"; (2) private pressure by politicians and the bureaucracy such as the threat of income tax raids; (3) the trolling of journalists by right-wing trolls often tacitly or otherwise supported by the government in power; (4) commercial pressures from advertisers and media owners on the media to report on safe issues; and (5) the threat of defamation now routinely used by politicians and business persons against journalists (paras. 6–10). Ayush Tiwari (2020), writing in the online portal *Newslaundry*, lists at least 24 journalists who have been booked under various laws for contesting the official account of the government's response to COVID-19. It is not, therefore, at all surprising that the 2020 report by the media-monitoring agency Reporters Without Borders ranked India 142 of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index in 2019, citing an increase in police violence against journalists and reprisals against journalists by criminal groups. The fact that the mainstream English-language daily newspaper *Hindustan Times* was forced to retract its "Hate Tracker" (after the resignation of its editor-in-chief Bobby Ghosh in 2017)—which helped "track acts of violence, threats of violence, and incitements to violence based on religion, caste, race, ethnicity, region of origin, gender identity and sexual orientation" across India (Masih, 2017, para. 4)—is another example of the media playing safe in a climate in which the economic and political consequences of dissent have made dissent tantamount to a risk that most media outlets are not willing to take. Again, when mainstream media, either through the politics of coercion or consent, simply give up on public interest reporting, the question is whether this is a consequence of populism or whether it is that of the more worrying and troubling "Deep State."

Conclusions

Populism is certainly a term that has been widely used to describe many things to many people. If the left-wing populism of the type favored by former Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez leans heavily on the rhetoric of redistribution, right-wing populism, of the kind currently in effect in contemporary Poland under Andrzejd Duda, supports conservative Catholic issues such as the "family" and "family values" against the perceived onslaught of an antifamily agenda pushed by LGBT groups. There is, in countries such India, an electoral populism highlighted by schemes based on subsidies and subsidized distribution of home and domestic electrical goods and conveyance, such as cycles and scooters for underprivileged populations. There is a populist politics against minorities, refugee invasions, and the threat of Islam. The list is endless, and it therefore becomes important for us to interrogate the term. Are there, for example, cases today where *populist*

is used to describe politicians who really could be better described as fascist? Would it be the case that in the context of the normalization of a hard politics and the emergence of "strong," "masculine" leaders the world over that *populism* has become an accepted descriptor precisely because its connotative breadth and significance is a lot more palatable than using the term fascist?

In other words, it is arguably the case that the discourse of populism that has been created and mediatized ultimately does a disservice to an understanding of the "real" impact of such policies on the lives of people, silent or otherwise, who are seen as an existential threat to the majority. The media—both legacy and social—have played an important role in the normalization of the muscular variant of populism that is now widespread. In the case of India, a pliant mass media has, in the context of the present government, pushed the boundaries of what can be considered acceptable discourse, thereby reinforcing the view that the media, for the most part, are partisan and therefore unable to contribute to the democratization of society. The social fabric for all Indian citizens guaranteed by the Indian Constitution is under serious threat. The "misrecognition" of this threat by the media, along with misinformation and disinformation online, has created spaces for open celebrations of majoritarian, muscular solutions. Although India is certainly not a full-blown fascist state, the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism certainly does suggest that as a viable solution. In this context, I think populist politics, as applied to India today, does not account for the real, symbolic, and discursive violence against India's democratic framework, its religious minorities, indigenous groups, and lower castes.

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