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Contemporary Populism and Political Communication in India: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Narendra Modi's Speech

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Abstract

Populism is a transnational phenomenon that considered as a substantial factor behind the re-orientation of global politics. This article suggests that the qualitative nature of the rhetorical structure employed by different political leaders ostensibly influences their respective political communication. From the perspective of populist communication, this study presents findings from the empirical analysis of Narendra Modi's Independence Day speech to understand the qualitative aspect of thematic constructs of populism. The phenomenon of populism is taken as a communicative style in which leader employ discursive strategies for constitution of the strong connection with the population. The rise of populism in the contemporary India, along with the enabling factors, put emphasis on the theoretical understanding of populist constructs in the political communication by the Modi. Using the critical discourse analysis, the article identifies articulation of discursive strategies embedded in the speech such as "narrative of slavery", politics of appeasement, Amrit Kal "Nation First", and "The People". The article contributed to academic literature pertaining to mediated populism in the non-western settings that can be interpreted through the lens of leader and people relations.

Keyword: Discourse, India, Populism, Modi, Political Communication.



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Introduction

The global surge of populism over the last decade has engulfed both the global north and global south (Wajner et al., 2024). The contemporary advancement in the field of populist literature opened up new vistas with respect to contextual understanding of populism in the non-western setting, since the political discourse has assimilated significant changes as a result of mediated and digitized world (Klebanov et al., 2008). The relationship between the media sphere and political discourse has a “symbiotic” dimension (Fetzer & Bull, 2012, p. 128) because through media, the political leader construct and transmit their political opinion, beliefs and ideational narratives. In 2014, unlike the previous non-populist government during the Vajpayee era, Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India by employing populist ideational framework as adopted by other populist leaders (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). This study seeks to critically evaluate the discursive construction in the speech delivered by the Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, at Red Fort on the occasion of 77th Independence Day of India. Narendra Modi is able to secure the third term as India's prime minister, however, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) failed to secure the parliamentary majority in the 2024 general elections. The resultant coalition, National Democratic Alliance, got enough seats to form the government. The lack of parliamentary majority of BJP make it depended on the regional parties to stay in government (Saaliq, 2024).

Populism has emerged as a significant phenomenon in global politics, both in the developing and developed world owing to a changing social reality resulted by the neoliberal globalization (Hadiz & Chrysosgelos, 2017). The populist nature of Indian political milieu after the ascendance of BJP in 2014 started to received scholarly attention, however, the historical instance of populism in India have been succinctly analyzed by Subramanian that illustrates the periodic appearance of populist rhetoric in Indian political milieu since independence (Subramanian, 2007). According to Yilmaz and Morieson (2022), the conjoining of Hindutva with populism encapsulated the civilization narrative with implications for secularism and democratic credentials for India (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022).

Scholars have observed the phenomenon of populism in multiple dimensions rather to restrict it in absolute or singular domain. The term ‘populism’ can be operationalized as having an ‘ideology’ (Mudde, 2004; Wiles, 1969); to examine it as a discourse (Cleen et al., 2018); and to observe populism as a distinct communication style. Moreover, the categorization of “others” by populist is grounded on socio-religious and cultural aspects (Sengul, 2022). Populism has become a media fascination and zeitgeisty explanation in the political discourse. The political actors often employ populist appeal in their political communication to attract the voters using the binary construction of identity into “us” vs. “them” narrative. Narendra Modi in his speech, with respect to development projects, said that he is the “chosen one”, however, DeHanas (2023) empirically examined the instances of sacred and redemptive nature of populism in the contemporary Indian political landscape (DeHanas, 2023). The causes behind the rise of populism can be attributed to multifaced factors. In addition to the economic perils after the global financial crisis, researchers have also outlined the cultural and regional migration as a pivotal factor that augment the populist appeal among the masses (Aiginger, 2020). Media act as a conveyor belt between the political actors and voters in which the former craft the populism as a communicative style through the discursive practices (De Vreese et al., 2018).

There is a link between the transformation in the media landscape and populism, since the political actors might leverage the contemporary media ecosystem for populist rhetoric. Subsequently, the latest trends in the communication model changed the journalistic practices to adopt populist nature of communication practices (Pajnik, 2024). The rise of social media has contributed as a

‘multiplier aspect’ into the surge of populism because of the ability of political elite to directly connect with the general population without relying on the traditional media’s gate-keeper. Modi, keeping in view the populist style, prefer direct communication using the social media to engage with the population as a political communication strategy (Rodrigues & Niemann, 2019). Indian Prime Minister, as compared to Donald Trump, employ populist narrative in his political rhetoric using the digital mediums more tactically rather in a strategic manner (Martelli & Jumle, 2023).

The populist strand in India, termed as “populist civilizationist” conjoin populism with religion and nationalism in order to invoke the historical narrative and appeal based on emotions. The construction of bygone golden age is represented as a stolen glory by the foreign elements, primarily “Muslim invaders” and vilify them as “others” (Saleem et al., 2022). In order to protect that “glory” populist involved in the legislative practices that are detrimental for some segment of society. In India, under the leadership of populist leader, the rise of populism has undermined the secular credentials and rule of law. Hence, Modi often invoke the civilizational narrative by constructing the natives of the land as victims of slavery for 1,200 years (Delacroix, 2024).

In this article, the attempt has been made to link the populist logic with the political communication to understand the theoretical grid under which the construction of meaning by the political actors can be contextually understood. Another reason to investigate this phenomenon is to decontextualize the meaning of populism from the western lens and re-purpose the meaning-making of the concept in non-western milieu. The interpretative understanding enables the researcher to uncover the populist theme embedded in the Modi’s speech. In line of this argument, the research would take populism primarily as a communicative style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) that accentuate the construction of political ‘others’ and binary identities. The research will enhance the understanding of political discourse through the theoretical construct of populism. Moreover, this study endeavors to thematically analyze the populist discourse in the speech given by the Narendra Modi on the occasion of 77th Independence Day of India.

Research Methodology

This research employs qualitative research method to analyze the speech delivered by the Narendra Modi. The critical discourse analysis, as research analysis method, has been adopted to evaluate the different themes. Scholars have analyzed the political speeches of different politicians to analyze the ‘principal verb’ forms used by the leaders (Fetzer & Bull, 2012). The speech and textual corpus have been collected from digital database. The total word count of the Modi’s speech is 9,298 words (Srinivasan & Doshi, 2024). While analyzing and dissecting the discursive practices employed in the speech, the linguistic tropes and broader socio-cultural context have been taken into account for the thematic understanding of the content. Initially, the researcher retrieved the multimedia version of the speech from the online database and then also consulted the full text of the speech for better understanding and clarification. After the collection of data, the broader themes would be enlisted in line with the theoretical construct of populism, and the themes are not exhausted in nature; however, they would be relevant to the contextual understanding of the populist discourse.

What is Populism?

Over the period of time, there is a growing surge of scholarly attention towards the different factors and dimensions of populism. Scholars have studied the impact of domestic, ideational and systematic factors on the changing nature of populism at global spectrum (Chrysosgelos, et al., 2023). The populism, as an idea, existed from a very long time however its precise theoretical constructs remained subtle. It is pertinent to conceptually define the basic contour of populism in

order to constructively apply the framework into contemporary Indian politics. Even though populism is a trans-national phenomenon, it is important to situate the theoretical construct in non-western setting. Populism has been characterized as discursive rhetoric that is strategically appropriated or deployed by the political actors, however the operationalization of populism also entails the aspect of “limits of enchantment” (Brubaker, 2017). Populism can be more orientated towards the ‘ideological’ aspect of populist phenomenon rather than on the employment of ‘rhetoric’ by the political elite. Another significant aspect of populism is its response to both the material and non-material nature of crises (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). By outlining the contextual factors behind the rise of populism in India would draw the framework of political communication and its relevance to populist rhetoric. The argument behind the surge of populism implicitly employ the ‘economic dimension’ that addresses the role of weak governance and failure of once-dominant parties to cater the voter’s demands (Ibid). Apart from the causes behind the rise of populism, the term in itself received disputes in terms of its ontological dimensions, however, the understanding of populism at multiple level encompassing latent constructs would entail a better manifestation. So, the conceptual clarity would differentiate the populism from the conception of nationalism (OSUNA, 2021).

The theoretical nuances with reference to the populism have distinctly evaluated the regressive and progressive nature of populism with latter’s non-fixation on ideological inclination. In the context of India, it is important to follow the roots of contemporary populism in order to comprehend the manifestation of populist phenomenon (Subash, 2022). In India, starting from the colonial rule as a first wave of populism, the respective phenomenon appeared in a periodic manner. Subsequently, another wave of populism is attributed to Mahatama Gandhi which embodies the charismatic leadership as conceptualized by the Weber. The charismatic leaders employ the communicative style and rhetoric to strategically place themselves in the midst of crises. After the demise of Jawaharlal Nehru, the era of Indira Gandhi is bracketed with populism due to the enactment of anti-democratic moves and strategical craft of Indira Gandhi’s image of herself as ‘voice of people.’ Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, also projected himself as different from the ‘others’ i.e., elite and dynastic politics. In the election campaign of 2014, Modi constructed the binary/Manichean identities in order to change the status quo (Subash, 2022). By adopting the Neo-Durkheimian framework, Dehanas (2023) argued that the social formulation based on binary aspect into sacred and profane are also made by the populists that leads to the “sacralization of politics” (DeHanas, 2023). Hence, this article focusses on the populist communication employed by the political actor i.e., Narendra Modi, in his 77th Independence Day speech.

Thematic analysis

• Narrative of Slavery and New Era: Amrit Kal

In his speech, Modi uttered that the country was invaded “1000-1200” years ago and this historical instance puts an indelible mark for centuries (The Indian Express, 2023). By locating the present address i.e. in 2023 with historical references, Modi tried to highlight the historical victimhood of the respective country that was ruled by the “others”. Research shows that in the contemporary discourse related to populist paradigms, the historical victimhood is a feature which relates the historical victimization through the construction of binary identities (Al-Ghazzi, 2021). Modi also iterated the bravery of the freedom fighters who established the sacrifice as a tradition, and their efforts materializes in 1947 when the country got independence. It can be argued that the narrative of slavery and subjugation was invoked to emphasize the historical injustices meted out by invaders. However, at the same time, the “formidable” forces were present in India’s brave souls,

and Modi gave special references to “women power, youth power, farmers and people from the villages, workers and every Indians” that played a significant role to break the shackles of slavery (The Indian Express, 2023).

At the onset of his speech, Modi give references to the pre-partition figures such as Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Sri Aurobindo etc., to illustrate the contribution of respective figures in the independence of the country. In his speech, Modi tactfully conjoin the narrative of thousands of years of slavery with the era of “Amrit Kal.” As scholars argued regarding the populist references to the lost “Vedic golden age” (Vaishnav, 2019, p. 9), Modi in his speech stipulated the making of golden history by fellow countrymen in the next 1000 years to actualize the new resolutions. In 2021, Modi used the term ‘Amrit Kal’ for the first time in socio-economic sense while giving 75th Independence Day speech (Saksena, 2023). The origin of the term resides in the “Vedic Astrology” that refers to the ‘auspicious’ time to initiate a new work. The reference point of Modi to use this term is to undo the time that was lost during the era of slavery or subjugation, and to make a new framework for next 25 years in the realms of governance, digitization and technology (India Today, 2023). Ostensibly, Modi situates the bravery of Indian in pre-independence era and compounded it with coming times as an opportunity to attain the respective achievements. In the 77th Independence Day Speech, Modi again reiterate the term Amrit Kal as a time of opportunity to take actions that will define the country’s legacy, as Modi said “I am witnessing another opportunity before our country, it is our good fortune that either we are living in youth or we have taken birth in the lap of Mother India in the first year of ‘Amrit Kal’” (The Indian Express, 2023). Modi also iterated that the existence of “democracy, demography and diversity” possess the potential to actualize the Indian dream. It can be argued that under the leadership of Modi, the state got an opportunity to dwell into an auspicious time in order to bring the socio-economic development. However, the manifestation of the vision behind the Amrit Kal demands the scientific temper, since, the preponderance of the vast majority of people on pseudoscience and widening gap between theory and facts would make it difficult to actualize the Amrit Kal (Gollerkeri, 2023). Modi gave reference to the last decade (9-10 years), when BJP rose to power in 2014, during which India’s outlook for the betterment of the world has changed. Modi also emphasis on the notion of strengths i.e., impartiality and transparency, as a necessary factor to materialize the Amrit Kal for the 100th Independence Day of India in 2047 (The Indian Express, 2023).

• **Appeasement Politics and Nepotism**

Modi highlighted the major challenges such as nepotism, corruption and the politics of appeasement in his speech. Populist leader strives to reduce the heterogeneous element of the population into homogeneous unity for social identity of the people against the corrupt elite, since populist frame itself as real embodiment of people’s will (Sinha, 2017). Moreover, Modi highlighted that the aspect of appeasement has affected the national character and our nation needs to get rid of these three evils i.e., appeasement, corruption and nepotism (The Indian Express, 2023). He also said that the politics of appeasement has impacted the “social justice”. The employment of these three important elements in his speech imply the political practices of past major political party(s) and how they affected the distributional governance and efficacy of institutional performances. The politics of appeasement implied an indirect and veiled reference to the previous practices of other political parties (Dhar, 2023) and this rhetoric implied the felt ontological insecurity by other segments of the society, since the BJP from 1990’s presented the Congress party as pandering to the religious minorities for vote bank (Wojczewski, 2019). The episodic trajectory of populism in the Indian political landscape, during the era of both the

Congress and BJP, accentuate the prevalence of populism and narrative of binary construction of identity. Modi also iterated that strengthening of an India's democracy reside with the refusal to nepotism, and he put an emphasis on a "political party" as a reason for the distortion of a democracy in India (The Indian Express, 2017).

The discursive construction of a particular political party, as catering to the interest of 'minority' at the expense of majority of population, legitimizes the manifestation of populist discourse regarding the configuration of anti-establishment rhetoric (Učeň, 2007). Moreover, due to the narrative of 'humble background' propelled by Modi for himself, he claims to represent the will of "the people" against the elite (Dutta & Abbas, 2024). After the experience of uncertainty and instability in the previous eras, Modi regarded these factors behind the decision of countrymen to give parliamentary majority to his political party i.e., Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This exemplify the construction of binary identity through the discursive practices.

The genesis of "Hindutva-populism" propagated the conception of golden age and glorious past, along with the anti-people practices mandated by the corrupt elites (Ranjan, 2020). Both these factors were addressed by the Modi in his 77th Independence Day speech, last speech prior to general elections scheduled in 2024. Hence, the framing of the political "othering" of opponents by populist leaders put the latter as true representator of the people (Otto, 2022).

- **Nation First**

The term 'Nation First' in the Modi speech, as an expression of populist political communication, can also be found in the discursive domain of the US politics. The communicative logic employed by the Donald Trump represented the Manichean distinction and ontological insecurity felt by American citizens (Löfflmann, 2022). The proclamation of 'America First' by the Donald Trump running mate JD Vance, for the post of vice-president, highlighted the insecurities felt by the ordinary Americans, and how the proposed policies would give advantage to the American citizens (Fedor & Politi, 2024).

- **Direct appeal to "The People"**

Populism can be conceptualized as a political strategy in which the charismatic leader dwells into the binary distinction between the "general people" and the "corrupt elite". The formation of their narrative encapsulates the unfulfilled aspirations of the common people and try to frame the elites as irresponsible towards the "general will". One of the significant objectives of populist's communicative logic is to make direct appeal to 'the people'. Populists strive to represent the will of the general people by augmenting the latter's participation and enhance the institutional responsive in accordance with the wishes of "the people" (Vreese et al., 2018). Modi, in his speech, repeatedly employ signifiers or specific oratorical style such as "my dear family members", "my dear countrymen", "my dear citizens" and extensive use of "we" to portray himself as belong to the "the people". Modi began his speech with "My beloved 140 crore parivaarjan" (in English, the word parivaarjaan is translated as family members) (NDTV, 2023). The employment of these terms to make personal connection with "the people" by Narendra Modi, along with the narrative of 1000 years of slavery, illustrate the construction of populist framework in the post-colonial context (Lacatus et al., 2023).

According to a research conducted by The Hindu, over the period of time Modi talked more of the topics regarding youth, healthcare, rural, women and economy (Srinivasan & Doshi, 2024). The analysis illustrates that this selection of topic resonates with the public poll conducted in India

with regard to the saliency of issues pertaining to voters, and the findings shows that the issues of “economic growth and unemployment” were major concerns (Chengappa, 2023).

According to the scholarly literature on populism, “the people” can be considered as a moral category that might experience exploitation in terms of socio-economic aspects (Baker, 2019). The use of first-person pronouns and words such as ‘brother, sisters’ implies the establishment of personal connection through oratorical strategy with the general population. Moreover, this political discourse synchronizes with the populist framework (Jaffrelot & Martelli, 2017).

The discourse analysis illustrates the emphasis given by Modi to the power of youth. Modi highlighted the potential of the youth of India in the field of technology, and the formation of likewise policies by his government in order to strengthen the capability of the youth. As Modi said, “There is huge potential/capability in our youth power and our policies as well as our ways provide an enabling environment to strengthen it” (The Indian Express, 2023).

Concluding Remarks

This article attempted to critically analyze the communication practices employed by political actor using the populist rhetoric in India. The phenomenon of populism as rhetoric and communicative repertoire is significant to analyze the discursive construction of narrative by the political actors. The performance of populist communication by the PM Modi in his Independence Day speech, encapsulated in the theoretical construction of populism, is evaluated empirically in the study. The qualitative analysis of political discourse in the non-western setting is essential to understand the formulation of thematic aspects by populist to develop a relationship between political actor and audience. The analysis illustrates the employment of populist rhetoric in the communicative practice by the Modi. The significant thematic construction such as “Nation First”, politics of appeasement, “Amrit Kal” ostensibly shows the instances of populist narrative in the Independence Day speech which was delivered before the general elections of 2024. The article argued that political actors employ populist thematic construction in their political communication. The main contribution of this article is the analysis of rhetoric of Indian political leader and how the political actor from the non-western region employ populism as communication practice in speeches. In order to curtail the surge of populism around the global politics, the leaders need to minimize the employment of populist communication and put more emphasis on distributional policies with regards to socio-economic and cultural factors. Future research is needed to develop a discourse on political communication of political leaders before the elections to analyze their employment of populist rhetoric in their communication practices.

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