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Populism and Identity Politics in India: Strategies, Impacts, and Implications

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ABSTRACT

Populism and identity politics have been defining forces in Indian democracy, shaping political narratives, electoral strategies, and governance frameworks. This paper explores the intersection of populist rhetoric and identity-based mobilization, focusing on caste, religion, regionalism, and economic stratification as key determinants in Indian politics. Historically, identity-driven populism has been a powerful tool for mass mobilization, beginning with anti-colonial movements and evolving into a dominant political strategy in independent India. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, and Narendra Modi have leveraged identity politics to build political coalitions and challenge established elites, often framing their leadership as a response to the grievances of marginalized communities.

Through an analysis of political movements such as the Dravidian movement, Mandal Commission-driven caste politics, Hindutva nationalism, and welfare-based economic populism, this study examines how identity-driven populism has simultaneously democratized political participation and exacerbated social divisions. While caste-based and regional populism have enhanced representation for historically excluded communities, majoritarian populism—particularly religious nationalism—has contributed to communal polarization, weakening India's secular fabric. Additionally, the study highlights the impact of populist politics on democratic institutions, arguing that anti-elitist and emotionally charged narratives often delegitimize constitutional principles, undermine institutional checks and balances, and deepen electoral fragmentation.

This paper contends that while populism and identity politics have given voice to marginalized communities, their strategic exploitation by political actors has intensified social tensions, weakened national cohesion, and led to governance challenges. The study underscores the need for a balanced approach that promotes inclusive political participation while safeguarding democratic norms, pluralism, and institutional integrity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Overview of populism and identity politics: Populism is a political approach that seeks to represent the interests of "the common people" against an elite or established order. Populism

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is a product of mass appeal to common emotions and is often characterised as a conflict between the will of 'the people' and of 'the elite'. The concept of populism portrays the elites like politicians, intellectuals or bureaucrats as a corrupt people who are disconnected from the masses. It tends to portray the majorities as a rightful voice of the nation sidelining the minority interests. Identity politics on the other side is a phenomenon which refers to mobilization of the individuals or groups around shared social identities like caste, religion, language, ethnicity or region. It advocates for their socio-economic-political rights.² It prefers the collective identity of the individuals or groups over political or social affiliations, the purpose to secure political power and policy benefits for specific identity groups.³

In the context of India, identity politics and populism has been a significant influential force influencing India's socio-economic landscape since independence. The paper attempts to explore the intersection of some populist strategies and identity-based mobilization of the masses-caste, religion, language and region- and their role in shaping political narratives and outcomes. By investigating the strategies employed by leaders, the socio-political responses they elicited, and the long-term impacts of identity-driven populism, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how populism influences India's pluralistic democracy.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF POPULISM AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN INDIA

The Indian independence movement, was not only about the political agitation against British rule but also was about the profound social and cultural awakening. One of the earliest examples of mass mobilization with the help of identity was The Swadeshi Movement (1905–1911). Leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak utilized various cultural tools to galvanize the masses. It involved strategic use of religious festivals to foster unity and to ignite the public sentiments. In that context some religious festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi or Durga Puja served as a significant platform for mobilization of the masses. In fact, leaders like Tilak not only appealed to the Hindu religious identity but also instilled a feeling of regional pride, specifically in the context of Maharashtra.⁴ Further together with cultural or religious mobilization, other factors like caste or regional identities also significantly influenced the political discourse in colonial period. This claim can be substantiated in the formation of Justice Party in the year of 1916 which emerged to address the concerns of the oppressed communities and to advocate for their rights. Developments such as this marked the advent of organised caste-based mobilization in

² "India's Identity Politics: Then and Now" (Ashutosh Varshney with Vibha Pingle), in David A. Kelly, Ramkishan S. Rajan, and Gillian H. L. Goh, eds, *Managing Globalization: Lessons from China and India*, Singapore: World Scientific Book Corporation on behalf of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, 2006

³ Oommen, T.K. (2011). (Ed). *Social Movements I: Issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press

⁴ Sarkar, S. (1983). *Modern India 1885–1947*. Macmillan.

India.⁵ Further movements like Satyashodhak Samaj by Jyotirao Phule in 1873 focused upon caste justice and eradication of untouchability. The Satyashodhak Samaj advocated for the social reforms, education for lower castes and women, and to dismantle the caste hierarchies.⁶ In the process leaders like Phule framed the struggle of independence as a fight for caste justice, linking caste identities with broader nationalistic goals and setting a stage for Dalit movements which further led by figures like B. R. Ambedkar.

Alongside caste and regional identities, class-based mobilization began to take shape in the early 20th century. Socialist movements, led by intellectuals such as M. N. Roy, sought to address the growing economic inequalities in colonial India. The All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), founded in 1920, played a critical role in advocating for workers' rights and highlighting the exploitation of the working class under British economic policies. These early socialist movements laid the groundwork for class-based identity politics, which later found expression in the post-independence period through trade unions, labour movements, and leftist political parties.⁷ Socialist leaders such as M. N. Roy highlighted the importance of achieving economic liberation alongside political independence. Their vision of class struggle intertwined with the broader anti-colonial movement, as they emphasized the link between the exploitation of India's working class and the extractive policies of the colonial state. Consequently, the fight for independence evolved into a parallel struggle for economic justice, championing the rights of the proletariat and the peasantry.

III. EARLY POPULIST LEADERS AND MASS APPEAL

Mahatma Gandhi emerges as the most influential populist leader of the Indian independence movement. His vision for an independent India was grounded in the principle of "Sarvodaya," meaning the welfare of all. Gandhi's campaigns, particularly the Salt March (1930), resonated with the grievances of diverse communities and aimed to inspire widespread participation. He brilliantly brought people from all sections of society such as Hindus and Muslims, upper and lower castes by emphasizing common ideals of non-violence and self-reliance.⁸ Leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose exemplified a more militant form of populism. He focused on patriotism and the unity of all Indians in the fight against British imperialism. His slogan "Jai Hind" becoming a powerful rallying cry for the masses. While his approach was contrasted with

⁵ Washbrook, D. A. (1976). *The Emergence of Provincial Politics in Madras, 1880-1920*. Cambridge University Press

⁶ Omvedt, G. (1976). *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India*. Scientific Socialist Education Trust.

⁷ Guha, R. (1982). *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*. Duke University Press.

⁸ Parekh, B. (2001). *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, both forms of populism played complementary roles to each other in mobilizing the masses for independence.⁹ Dr Ambedkar played a significant role in mobilizing marginalized communities during the anti-colonial struggle. This has laid the groundwork for Dalit movements post-independence.¹⁰ Thus, it can be said that the use of identity and populist strategies during the anti-colonial struggle served as a foundation for post-independence Indian politics.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE IN INDIA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

India is a home of deeply diverse and stratified society which is a fertile ground for populism and identity politics. The social fabric of India is characterised around caste, religion, language, ethnicity, etc. It allows the populist parties and identity interested groups to shape political discourse and mobilization. Identity based politics often serves as a medium for marginalised communities to put forth their concerns and asserts their rights. This approach is a powerful tool for electoral success, enabling the political parties to mobilize specific groups by appealing to their identities and grievances. For instance, the Bhartiya Janta Party has leveraged its Hindutva narrative, while Bahujan Samajwadi Party has championed Dalit rights to build strong voter base. In this way identity politics has also played a crucial role in empowering historically oppressed groups such as Dalits, OBCs and the tribals by paving a way for representation in the main stream politics and governance.¹¹

V. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN IDENTITY POLITICS AND POPULISM

The interaction between populism and identity politics influences electoral strategies, governance, and social structures, especially in a diverse democracy like India. While populism connects with the people through anti-elitist, majoritarian, or emotionally charged narratives, identity politics rallies people based on shared traits such as caste, religion, language, or ethnicity.

Aspect	Populism	Identity Politics
Focus	Broad "people vs. elite" conflict	Specific identity-based group rights

⁹ Fay, P. W. (1993). *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence 1942-1945*. University of Michigan Press.

¹⁰ Jaffrelot, C. (2005). *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System*. Columbia University Press.

¹¹ Artatrana Gochhayat (2018). *IDENTITY POLITICS IN INDIA: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE*. International Journal of Art & Humanity Science(IJAHS) e-ISSN: 2349-5235 Vol. 1, Issue1 (July-August)

Scope	Inclusive rhetoric, though often majoritarian	Exclusive to defined social groups
Leadership	Charismatic individual leaders	Group-centric or movement-based
Overlap	Populism often uses identity politics to build voter blocs (e.g., caste-based or religious mobilization).	

Common Foundations of Populism and Identity Politics

Anti-Elitism: Both populism and identity politics challenge established elites, framing them as oppressors of the "true people" or marginalized groups.

Example: Populist leaders in India often portray themselves as representatives of oppressed castes or the "common man" against the privileged elites.

Mass Mobilization: Both rely on emotional and symbolic appeals to unite groups, whether based on caste, religion, or regional identity, around a populist agenda.

Simplification of Complex Issues: By focusing on "us versus them" rhetoric, the intersection of these phenomena often sidesteps nuanced policy discussions.

VI. STRATEGIC USE OF IDENTITY IN POPULISM

Populism, as a political strategy, frequently centres on crafting and mobilizing "us vs. them" narratives, where political leaders aim to rally support by appealing to the collective identities of different social groups. A central tactic employed by populist leaders globally, including in India, is the strategic use of identity politics. By drawing on caste, religious, regional, and economic identities, populist leaders shape narratives that portray existing power structures as exclusionary, positioning themselves as defenders of marginalized or vulnerable groups.

(A) Caste Identity in Populism

A prominent example of caste-based populism in Indian politics is the rise of Kanshi Ram and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), founded in 1984. Kanshi Ram has visioned to create a common political platform to represent the interests of Bahujan Samaj which includes Dalits, OBCs and tribal communities. He framed his populist narrative around systematic exclusion of this castes from power and resources. He argued for dedicated political force to dismantle the caste-based oppression. It is under his leadership, the BSP gained a significant success in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The main strategy of the party was focused upon grassroots level activism, mobilizing Dalits and forming alliance with other backward castes and marginalised communities. This

approach resulted in a huge success in the politics of UP establishing BSP as a key player in Indian politics. Mayawati further solidified party's influence by serving as a Chief Minister of UP for multiple times. Similarly, Lalu Prasad Yadav in Bihar is another example of caste-based identity politics. Lalu capitalized on the growing political awareness in the OBCs the challenge the dominance of Upper castes in Bihar politics. His populist appeal was stemmed in his portrayal of himself as a leader of OBCs and a common village man. He formed a formidable coalition of OBCs, Dalits and Minorities which reshaped the political landscape of Bihar. Lalu proclaimed that his government represented the interests of the "real Bihar," contrasting it with the elite political establishments of the past. His earthy humour and appeal to rural sensibilities resonated deeply with OBC and Dalit communities. Lalu's populist rhetoric played a key role in establishing caste-based identity as a central element in Bihar's political discourse, making the state a stronghold of caste-based populism.¹²

This rise of leaders like Kanshi Ram, Lalu Prasad Yadav underscores the transformative impact of the caste upon the Indian politics. This leader centred their populist narratives around caste-based empowerment to challenge the traditional dominance of upper castes and brought issues of social justice and political representation in forefront. This has reshaped the electoral dynamics with political parties increasingly adopting a strategy to appeal a specific identity group. This further resulted into formation of caste coalitions where political parties attempted to mobilise alliances of Dalits, OBCs and other marginalised groups. Identity driven politics though enhanced political participation of historically excluded groups but on the other hand also resulting into deepening caste divisions and complicating efforts to create a more comprehensive government framework.

(B) Religious Identity in Populism

In India religious sentiments in the context of Hindu nationalism have been strategically leveraged to consolidate political support through the promotion of Hindutva. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Bhartiya Janata Party have effectively used Hindutva as a cornerstone of their populist rhetoric. They positioned themselves as defenders of Hindu culture, values, and identity. This religious and cultural appeal has been particularly influential in the BJP's electoral strategies especially after 2014 under the leadership of Narendra Modi. The intellectual foundation of religious populism in India is rooted in Hindutva, a term introduced by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's ideology. Savarkar in his book *Hindutva: Who Is*

¹² Jaffrelot, C. (2003). *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. Columbia University Press.

a Hindu?.in 1923 asserted that India is not just a secular state but a Hindu nation with its identity defined by Hindu culture and values. This ideology of Hindu primacy is utilized by the BJP and RSS to solidify Hindu identity as a central element of India's political narrative. Leaders like Advani and Modi have embraced Hindutva to present the BJP as the guardian of Hindu interests and values.

The notion of Hindu victimhood has been central to the party's populist rhetoric, portraying themselves as protectors of the Hindu community from perceived threats such as Muslims or Christians.¹³ The Ram Janmabhoomi movement serves as a clear example of how religious identity has been strategically mobilized by the BJP to gather mass support. The BJP, and RSS leveraged this issue to stir strong emotions within the Hindu community by presenting the mosque as a symbol of Muslim oppression and the erosion of Hindu cultural heritage. It emphasized the notion that Hindus had been systematically marginalized and oppressed in both colonial rule and under post-independence policies that favoured Muslim-majority interests. By presenting the BJP as the protector of Hinduism, the party effectively united a significant portion of the Hindu electorate, helping it emerge as a powerful political force in India. Under Narendra Modi's leadership, the BJP has deepened its focus on Hindutva as a tool for mobilizing Hindu votes. Modi's rhetoric often emphasizes the notion of a strong Hindu identity that stands in contrast to the perceived threats posed by other religious groups. His speeches, both before and after becoming Prime Minister in 2014, have consistently invoked the need for Hindu unity and Hindu pride ("Batenge to katenge" and "Ek hai to safe hai") framing India's political future as inextricably linked to the empowerment of Hindus. Modi's leadership in the BJP's electoral victories since 2014 has been framed as a triumph of Hindu values over secularism, which is often portrayed by the party as an artificial construct undermining Hindu culture. For instance, Modi's slogan "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" (Together with all, Development for all) is often interpreted through the lens of Hindu majoritarianism, where Hindu unity is presented as the foundation for national development and growth. The focus on economic growth and national security is often juxtaposed with the need to protect Hindu values from external influences, particularly from Islamic terrorism and the perceived rise of Islamic fundamentalism in neighbouring countries like Pakistan. The 2014, 2019, and 2024 general elections in India saw a strong focus on religious nationalism, with Modi's image as a Hindu leader playing a central role in the party's appeal.

¹³ Varshney, A. (1993). Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety. *Daedalus*, 122(3), 227–261

(C) Regional Identity in Populism

Dravidian populism in Tamil Nadu stands out as one of the most enduring examples of regional identity politics. Led by figures like Periyar, C. N. Annadurai, and M. Karunanidhi, the movement framed Tamil identity as a means to resist the political, cultural, and linguistic dominance of the Hindi-speaking North. By combining the regional pride with populist rhetoric, Dravidian leaders successfully positioned themselves as champions of Tamil culture and identity.¹⁴ The DMK framed the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1960s not only as a cultural issue but also as a political struggle for Tamil self-determination. The notion of resisting the perceived cultural hegemony of Hindi speakers became central to the ideology of Dravidian populism.¹⁵ Dravidian populism has left a long-lasting mark on both Tamil Nadu as well as India's politics. Both the DMK and the AIADMK, have effectively used regional identity as the foundation for their political dominance in the state. The political appeal of Dravidian leaders such as M. Karunanidhi and J. Jayalalithaa has been rooted in their ability to articulate and defend Tamil identity, often presenting themselves as guardians of Tamil culture against central policies perceived as detrimental to regional interests.¹⁶ The DMK and AIADMK effectively framed their electoral victories as triumphs for Tamil culture, using the narrative of protecting Tamil identity from the imposition of Hindi and other forms of cultural dominance as a key mobilizing tool.¹⁷

This success of Dravidian populism in Tamil Nadu had a significant impact on other regional movements in India, particularly in states that have faced similar grievances related to language, culture, and political autonomy. Regional parties in states like Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Punjab and Andhra Pradesh have adopted aspects of Dravidian populism, using regional identity as the core of their political rhetoric.

(D) Economic Identity in Populism

In Indian politics, economic and welfare identity has become a central tool for populist leaders to gain political traction, particularly among marginalized and economically disadvantaged sections of society. Welfare programs framed through identity politics whether caste, class, or regional identity serve as powerful mechanisms for securing voter loyalty. Leaders often frame

¹⁴ Ramaswamy, V. (1997). *Passions of the Tongue: Language and Politics in the Making of Modern India*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Gopal, S. (1984). *The Dravidian Movement*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ Ludden, David & Subramanian, Narendra. (2001). Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens, and Democracy in South India. *Journal of Asian Studies - J ASIAN STUD.* 60.10.2307/2700090.

¹⁷ Rajagopal, A. (2001). *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. Cambridge University Press.

their policies as essential for social and economic justice, using populist rhetoric to present themselves as champions of the poor. Populist leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Narendra Modi, Arvind Kejriwal have strategically employed welfare policies and economic populism to appeal to different segments of society, justifying these measures with identity-based claims. Indira Gandhi's "Garibi Hatao" campaign stands as one of the most iconic instances of economic populism in post-independence India. The slogan, which featured prominently in her 1971 election campaign, targeted the vast, disenfranchised rural population, portraying her as a leader dedicated to eradicating poverty. It framed poverty not merely as an economic issue but as a matter of social justice, connecting with the identity of the poor, particularly the rural poor. By prioritizing rural development and poverty alleviation, Indira Gandhi successfully established herself as the "champion of the poor," resonating with those segments of society that had long been marginalized from the benefits of economic progress. Narendra Modi's slogan "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" has become a central aspect of his populist appeal since he took office in 2014.¹⁸ Welfare initiatives like the Jan Dhan Yojana, Ujjwala Yojana, and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana have been framed with the message that development should benefit everyone. By presenting these policies as efforts to uplift marginalized groups Modi has effectively used the language of economic empowerment to secure support from these identity-based groups. Similarly, Arvind Kejriwal's rise through the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) represents another form of economic populism, with a distinct focus on urban poverty and the identity of the "common man" (Aam Aadmi). Kejriwal's slogan "Aam Aadmi Ki Sarkar" struck a chord with the urban poor, lower middle-class, and youth, particularly in Delhi.¹⁹ AAP's policies are designed to resonate with the urban poor's sense of identity, fostering a feeling of ownership and active participation in governance. By emphasizing his connection to the "common man" and presenting himself as a leader from modest origins, Kejriwal's identity-based approach has helped establish AAP as the voice of urban lower-income voters.²⁰

VII. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACTS

1. **Positive Impacts of Identity Based Populism:** Identity-based populism has given a platform to marginalized groups. Leaders like Kanshi Ram and Lalu Prasad Yadav centred their political movements on caste empowerment, advocating for the political representation of Dalits, OBCs, and other disadvantaged communities. The growth of

¹⁸ Gupta, D. (1988). *The Politics of Poverty: Welfare State Development in India*. Sage Publications.

¹⁹ Yadav, Y. (2014). *The Aam Aadmi Party and the Politics of Delhi*. *Economic and Political Weekly*.

²⁰ Chhibber, P., & Verma, R. (2018). *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India*. Oxford University Press.

caste and regional populism has led to more diverse representation in political institutions. A significant milestone in this process was the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report (1990), which recommended 27% reservations for OBCs in government jobs, marking a pivotal moment in promoting representation and addressing socio-economic disparities.²¹

2. **Negative Impacts of Identity-Based Populism:** Identity-based populism often exacerbates social divisions. The mobilization of caste, religious, and regional identities can deepen societal fissures, leading to tensions and violence. The anti-reservation protests of the 1990s were marked by caste-based violence, reflecting resistance to affirmative action policies. Religious populism, particularly the Hindutva movement, has contributed to communal polarization, as seen during the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. This kind of Majoritarian populism undermines India's secular framework by prioritizing the interests of the majority community.
3. **Political Impacts:** Identity-based populism has reshaped India's political landscape, enabling parties like the BSP, RJD, and DMK to gain prominence. The DMK's Dravidian populism in Tamil Nadu merged regional identity with anti-Hindi rhetoric, establishing a political narrative that resonated with Tamil pride. The focus on identity politics has fragmented national politics, often leading to coalition governments. The rise of regional and identity-based parties has shifted the political agenda toward localized concerns, sometimes at the expense of broader national priorities.²²
4. **Impact on Democratic Institutions:** Majoritarian populism challenges the secular and pluralistic foundations of Indian democracy. Religious populism, for instance, has fueled narratives that marginalize minorities and question their loyalty to the nation. The consolidation of Hindu votes through Hindutva narratives has weakened the secular ethos enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Populist rhetoric often delegitimizes democratic institutions by portraying them as elitist or disconnected from the masses. This undermines checks and balances and weakens the institutional framework of democracy.²³

²¹ Vijay Kumar et al (2019). An Analysis of the Role of Identity Politics in Shaping Electoral Outcomes: An Intersectional Perspective. *Int. J. S. Res. Sci. Technol.* January-February-2019; 6(1): 763-769

²² Auerbach, A.M. et al. (2022) 'Rethinking the Study of Electoral Politics in the Developing World: Reflections on the Indian Case', *Perspectives on Politics*, 20(1), pp. 250–264. doi:10.1017/S1537592721000062.

²³ Mitra, S. K. (1992). "Democracy and Social Change in India: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of the National Electorate." *Asian Survey*, 32(6).

VIII. CONCLUSION

While identity politics and populism have empowered marginalized communities, they have also contributed to social polarization and democratic challenges in India. The strategic use of caste, religion, and regional identities has often exacerbated divisions, undermining national unity and secularism. The intersection of populism and identity politics in India presents a double-edged challenge: it has democratized political participation and empowered disadvantaged groups, but it has also intensified divisions and posed threats to national cohesion. Navigating these complexities requires a balanced approach that embraces diversity while promoting inclusive governance and strengthening democratic resilience.
