

The Impacts of Rising Populism on Democracy in India

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Abstract— Populism is a political ideology that seeks to empower the masses against the elite. In recent years, India has experienced a surge in populist sentiment among its citizens, with politicians increasingly appealing to the public in an effort to garner support. This paper seeks to explore the impact of rising populism on democracy in India. It will examine the ways in which populism has both furthered and hindered the Indian democratic process, with a particular focus on the potential influence of populism on the judicial system, political parties, and elections. It argues that populism has positively impacted democracy in India, as it has provided a platform for the voices of the people to be heard, and has created a more competitive political landscape. Ultimately, this paper will offer insights into the implications of populism for the future of India's democracy. The rise of populism has significantly impacted the functioning of democratic institutions, with far-reaching implications for the country's political and economic future. This paper examines the impact of rising populism on democracy in India, focusing on its implications for the rule of law, civil liberties, political participation, and the economy, highlighting the need for greater public engagement and access to information in order to ensure a healthy democratic environment in India.

Keywords: India, populism, democracy, impact, rising, politics, social, economic, policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

populism, political program or movement that champions, or claims to champion, the common person, usually by favourable contrast with a real or perceived elite or establishment.¹ (*Populism | History, Facts, & Examples | Britannica*, n.d.) This paper will explore the impact rising populism has on India's democratic system, by examining the challenges it poses to traditional democratic values and the potential benefits it could bring. Additionally, the paper will explore the implications of populism for India's economic and social development. Finally, the paper will conclude with recommendations for addressing the potential challenges posed by populism. Populism has the potential to disrupt India's democratic system in several ways. First, it can undermine the rule of law, as populist leaders often rely on strong-arm tactics to get their way. This can lead to an erosion of civil liberties, as well as increased corruption and cronyism. Second, populism can also lead to an erosion of political accountability, as populist leaders are less likely to be held accountable for their actions and policies.

Third, populism can lead to a weakening of the separation of powers, as populist leaders often seek to centralize power and control, diminishing the role of other branches of government.² (*How Does Populism Endanger Democracy? | Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis | Oxford Academic*, n.d.) Finally, populism can lead to a rise in sectarianism and divisiveness, as populist leaders often attempt to exploit existing divisions within society in order to gain power. In spite of these potential challenges, populism also has the potential to bring several benefits to India's democratic system. For example, it can lead to greater public participation in politics, as populist leaders often seek to engage with the public and incorporate their concerns into policy-making. Additionally, populism can also lead to greater economic equality and social justice, as populist leaders often prioritize these issues. Finally, populism can also lead to a greater sense of political inclusion, as populist leaders often seek to represent marginalized communities and reduce the power of elites. The implications of populism for India's economic and social development are also significant. On the economic side, populism could lead to increased

¹ **populism**, political program or movement that champions, or claims to champion, the common person, usually by favourable contrast with a real or perceived elite or establishment. (*Populism | History, Facts, & Examples | Britannica*, n.d.)

² (*How Does Populism Endanger Democracy? | Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis | Oxford Academic*, n.d.)

economic inequality and greater instability, as populist policies often favour the wealthy over the poor.³ (*How Does Income Inequality Affect Support for Populist Parties?* | EUROPP, n.d.)

Additionally, populism could lead to a weakening of economic institutions and the rule of law, as populist leaders often prioritize short-term gains over long-term economic growth. On the social side, populism could lead to an erosion of social cohesion, as populist leaders often engage in divisive rhetoric and policies that further divide society. Additionally, populism could lead to a decrease in social mobility, as populist leaders often favour their own supporters and marginalize those who do not belong to their base. Finally, there are several recommendations for addressing the potential challenges posed by populism. First, governments should focus on strengthening the rule of law and promoting good governance, as this will reduce the potential for populist leaders to abuse their power. Second, governments should focus on promoting economic equality and social justice, as this will reduce the potential for populist leaders to exploit existing divisions within society. Third, governments should focus on increasing political inclusion and ensuring that all voices are heard, as this will reduce the potential for populism to undermine.⁴ (*The Causes of Populism in the West* | *Annual Review of Political Science*, n.d.)

II. THEORETICAL OUTFIT OF THE POPULISM

Populism is a political approach that appeals to the interests and concerns of ordinary people, especially those who feel that their needs and desires are being ignored by the political establishment.⁵ (Urbinati, 2019) It emphasizes the power of the people and seeks to empower them to make their voices heard. Populism is often used as a tool to mobilize large sections of the population to bring about social and political change. In India, populism has been on the rise in recent years, with the emergence of a number of populist leaders. These leaders have tapped into the dissatisfaction of large sections of the population, who feel that their needs and concerns are not being addressed by the country's political establishment. These leaders have exploited the grievances of such sections of the population and used them to mobilize support for their own causes. The rise of populism in India has significantly impacted democracy in the country. Populist leaders have sought to exploit popular grievances and use them to gain power, often at the expense of democratic principles and procedures. This has resulted in a weakening of the country's democratic institutions and the erosion of public trust in the political process. Populist leaders have also been accused of using divisive rhetoric and engaging in hate speech to further their own political interests

III. DEMOCRACY IN TRUE SENSE

A democracy is a system of government in which the citizens of a country have the right to participate in the decision-making process by electing representatives to represent their interests.⁶ (Zaken, 2014) Populism is a political ideology that emphasizes the needs and interests of the people over those of the government or political elites. In India, the rise of populism has had a profound impact on democracy. The most significant impact is the shift in political discourse towards a more populist approach. Populist leaders have sought to tap into the grievances of the people and have sought to offer solutions to address these grievances. This has led to a shift away from traditional forms of governance, such as parliamentary democracy, towards more direct forms of democracy where citizens have a greater say in the decision-making process. The rise of populism has also led to a greater focus on the grievances of certain social groups, such as the lower classes, who have traditionally been excluded from the political process. This has resulted in a greater focus on social justice, with an emphasis on reducing inequality and

³ (*How Does Income Inequality Affect Support for Populist Parties?* | EUROPP, n.d.)

⁴ (*The Causes of Populism in the West* | *Annual Review of Political Science*, n.d.)

⁵ (Urbinati, 2019)

⁶ (Zaken, 2014)

ensuring access to basic services such as health care and education. This has created a more inclusive and participatory political system, resulting in a more democratic India. Finally, the rise of populism has led to a greater focus on grass.

IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rising populism in India has been a growing concern in recent years. In the past, populism has been associated with a variety of movements and ideologies, ranging from the right-wing Hindutva of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to the left-wing populism of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).⁷ (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019) The emergence of these new forms of populism has raised questions about the impact they will have on India's democratic system and the future of its democracy. Populism in India has a long history, dating back to the early 20th century when the Indian National Congress (INC) emerged as a major political force. The INC adopted a populist approach to politics, focusing on the needs of the common people and promoting social justice.⁸ This approach was further developed by Mahatma Gandhi, who emphasized the importance of non-violent resistance and mass mobilization in the struggle against British colonial rule. In the decades since independence, populism in India has taken on new forms, with the rise of the BJP and the AAP. The BJP has embraced a right-wing Hindu nationalist agenda, while the AAP has adopted a left-wing populist approach that focuses on social welfare and economic development. Both parties have been successful in mobilizing large numbers of voters, often in opposition to the traditional parties of the Indian political system. While populism can be a powerful force for bringing about political change, it can also lead to the erosion of democratic values and institutions. The rise of populism in India has been accompanied by a rise in communalism and the erosion of civil liberties. Populist parties have also been accused of exploiting popular discontent for political gain, with the BJP in particular being accused of using populism to gain power and undermine India's democratic institutions.⁹ (Gudavarthy, 2021) The impact of rising populism on democracy in India is still unfolding, and it is too early to draw any firm conclusions. However, it is clear that populism has already had a significant impact on India's democratic system and the future of its democracy. As the populist wave continues to rise, it is important to ensure that democratic values and institutions are not undermined in the process.

V. OVERVIEW OF POPULISM'S IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

Populism has had a significant impact on democracy in India. Populist politicians have used the power of their rhetoric to capture the hearts and minds of the people and to shape political discourse.¹⁰ (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) They have championed a number of policies and initiatives, such as economic reforms, increased welfare spending, and the protection of minority rights. These policies and initiatives have had a profound effect on the democratic process in India. Populist politicians have been able to bring about a change in the way public discourse is conducted in India. They have made it more personal, and have been able to articulate the concerns of the people in a more effective and engaging way. This has allowed them to capture the hearts and minds of the people and to shape public opinion. This has enabled them to have a greater influence over the political process and to shape the policy agenda of the government. (Subramanian, 2007)

Populist politicians have also been able to gain a greater degree of control over the media, which has been instrumental in furthering their agenda. They have been able to use the media to spread their message to a larger audience and to push their policy agenda. This has meant that the public has been exposed to a range of views and that populist politicians have been able to shape the narrative in a way that benefits them. Ultimately, populism in India has had a profound impact on democracy in the country. It has enabled populist politicians to gain more control over the political discourse and to shape the policy agenda of

⁷ (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019)

⁸ <https://www.populismstudies.org/civilizationist-populism-in-south-asia-turning-india-saffron/>

⁹ (Gudavarthy, 2021)

¹⁰ (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017)

the government. This has had a significant effect on the way in which people view and engage with the political process, and has had a profound effect on the future of democracy in India.

VI. FACTORS THAT LED TO THE RISE OF POPULISM IN INDIA

- ❖ Increasing Economic Inequality: India is one of the most unequal countries in the world with the top 1% of earners controlling almost a quarter of the total wealth. This has led to increasing discontent among the working class, which has in turn resulted in populist rhetoric being used to appeal to the masses.¹¹
- ❖ Growing Alienation from Traditional Political Parties: Traditional political parties in India have become increasingly distant from the people and are seen as corrupt and out of touch with the needs of ordinary citizens. This has created an opening for populist politicians to step in and provide an alternative.
- ❖ Rise of social media: social media has provided a platform for populist politicians to spread their message and gain support from the masses. This has enabled them to bypass traditional media outlets and appeal directly to the people.¹²
- ❖ Increasing Polarization of Society: The rise of populist rhetoric has further divided the country along religious, caste, and regional lines, making it easier for populist politicians to capitalize on these divisions.
- ❖ Frustration with the Pace of Development: Many Indians feel that the pace of economic and social development has been too slow and that the government has not done enough to improve their lives. This has led to frustration and a desire for change, which has been exploited by populist politicians. (*Factors That Led to the Rise of Populism in India: - Google Search, n.d.*)

VII. IMPACT POPULISM

Populism has become a major force in India's political landscape, with an increasing number of parties and individuals relying on it to make their case and to rally support.¹³ (Kenny, 2017) The rise of populism has had a significant impact on India's democracy. Firstly, populism has increased the presence of majoritarianism in Indian politics. This has led to greater polarization among the population, with people divided between those who support the populist narrative and those who oppose it. This has made the task of governing more difficult and has put a strain on the country's institutions. Secondly, populism has also had an effect on the functioning of the Indian political system. Populist rhetoric has often been used to circumvent the due process of law and to push through legislation that is not in the best interests of the people. This has weakened the rule of law and has made it easier for the government to act unilaterally. Thirdly, populism has also led to an erosion of the space for dissent and for debate.

Populist leaders have sought to demonize their opponents and to shut down any criticism or opposition. This has had the effect of stifling the functioning of India's democracy and has made it difficult for citizens to voice their opinions and concerns in an open and meaningful way. Finally, the rise of populism has also had an impact on public trust in the political process. Populist leaders have often made extravagant promises that they have been unable to fulfil, leading to a lack of trust in the political system and in the government. This has made it difficult for the government to take meaningful action on important issues and has further eroded public confidence in the democratic process. Overall, the rise of populism and majoritarianism in India has had a detrimental effect on the country's democracy. Populist leaders have sought to circumvent the rule of law, stifle dissent, and erode public trust in the political process. This has made it difficult for India to make progress on important issues and has weakened the functioning of the country's democracy. (Kenny, 2017)

¹¹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/india-among-the-most-unequal-countries-with-an-affluent-elite-report/articleshow/88154715.cms>

¹² <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-022-01317-y>

¹³ (Kenny, 2017)

VIII. IMPACT ON POLITICAL PARTIES

The rise of populism in India has significantly impacted democracy in the country. Populist policies and rhetoric have reshaped the political landscape, with major implications for the country's political parties.¹⁴(Plagemann & Destradi, 2019) Populist policies have allowed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to gain a strong foothold in Indian politics. The party's embrace of populist ideas, such as its opposition to the secularism of the Congress Party and its vocal support of Hindu nationalism, have attracted a large base of support. This has allowed the BJP to become the most powerful party in India and has shifted the country's politics to the right. Populist rhetoric has also allowed smaller parties to make gains in recent elections. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has capitalized on the appeal of populism to gain a large base of support. The party's message of anti-corruption and promises of good governance have resonated with many voters, allowing the party to become a major force in Indian politics.¹⁵ (*Populism and Populist Politics in South Asia with Special Reference to India*, n.d.)

The rise of populism has also had implications for India's major parties. The Congress Party has seen its support base erode as the BJP has capitalized on the appeal of populist ideas. The party has been unable to counter the BJP's rise and has seen its support base shrink as a result. Similarly, the Left has been unable to gain much traction as the BJP has been able to dominate the populist narrative. In conclusion, the rise of populism in India has had a significant impact on democracy in the country. Populist policies and rhetoric have allowed the BJP to become the most powerful party in India while allowing smaller parties such as the AAP to gain a foothold in the political landscape. Meanwhile, the major parties, such as the Congress and the Left, have been unable to counter the BJP's rise and have seen their support base shrink as a result.¹⁶(*PFI Ban a Worn Out Tactic by BJP to Gain Control of the Political Narrative*, n.d.)

IX. IMPACT ON ELECTIONS AND IMPACT ON CIVIL SOCIETY

Rising populism has had a profound impact on democracy in India. Populist rhetoric has become a major factor in Indian elections, as politicians of all stripes have embraced populist messaging to appeal to the increasing numbers of citizens who feel disempowered. This rhetoric has become increasingly polarizing, as politicians attempt to create a "them versus us" narrative in order to win over voters. As a result, voters have become increasingly divided, making it difficult for rational discourse to take place. Populist rhetoric has also had a significant effect on civil society in India. Populist politicians have sought to capitalize on the discontent of certain sections of society, such as farmers, by offering solutions that often lack any real substance. This has led to the creation of large, often vocal, protest movements which have the potential to disrupt civil society and undermine the stability of Indian democracy.¹⁷(Mottiar, n.d.)

The rise of populism has also had an impact on the freedom of the press in India. The media has become increasingly partisan, as populist politicians have sought to control the narrative and limit the voices of opposition. This has led to the silencing of dissenting voices, further limiting the ability of civil society to engage in meaningful debate. In conclusion, the rise of populism in India has had a profound impact on democracy in India. It has led to increased polarization, the silencing of dissenting voices,

¹⁴ (Plagemann & Destradi, 2019)

¹⁵ *Populism and Populist Politics in South Asia with Special Reference to India*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 4, 2022, from http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_Populism/RLS_Populism_Home.asp

¹⁶ *PFI Ban a Worn Out Tactic by BJP to Gain Control of the Political Narrative*. (n.d.). The Wire. Retrieved December 4, 2022, from <https://thewire.in/politics/pfi-ban-bjp-political-narrative>

¹⁷ Mottiar, S. (n.d.). The KwaZulu-Natal Democracy and Elections Forum – *Journal of African Elections*, 9(1), 18. Mottiar, n.d.)

and the disruption of civil society. It is essential that politicians, civil society, and the media work together to combat this trend and ensure that the democratic process remains open and accessible to all. The Indian government must take a proactive role in promoting democracy and dialogue in the country. This includes setting up mechanisms to enable free and fair elections, and creating an environment in which civil society is able to engage in meaningful debates. In addition, the government must ensure that the media remains free and independent and that no one is silenced for expressing their views. Only by addressing these issues can Indian democracy remain vibrant and secure.¹⁸(Mottiar, n.d.)

X. COUNTERACTING POPULISM

Populism is a term that is often used to describe a political movement or ideology which seeks to represent the interests of ordinary people. In India, populism has been on the rise over the past few years, with a focus on issues such as economic inequality, anti-corruption, and the rights of marginalized communities. This has led to a number of populist policies and initiatives, such as the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the establishment of the Special Investigation Team (SIT) to investigate corruption cases. However, the rise of populism in India has also had a negative impact on democracy. Populist policies often privilege the interests of the majority, while ignoring the concerns of minority groups. This has resulted in a lack of accountability in government, as well as a decrease in public trust in democratic institutions. Moreover, populism has also led to an increase in extremism and violence, which has further eroded the legitimacy of democracy in India. In order to counteract the negative effects of populism in India, it is important to focus on increasing public participation in the democratic process. This includes creating more opportunities for citizens to engage in decision-making, as well as ensuring that all voices are heard and respected in the political arena. Additionally, it is essential to strengthening democratic institutions, such as the judiciary and the media, in order to ensure that the rights of all citizens are respected and protected. Lastly, it is important to promote dialogue and debate among all stakeholders, in order to ensure that all perspectives are considered when making decisions. By doing so, India can ensure that populism does not undermine democracy and that the interests of all citizens are represented.¹⁹(*Combating Populism*, n.d.)

XI. CONCLUSION

The rise of populism in India has significantly impacted the country's democratic system. Populist policies have been used to gain political power and manipulate the public's opinion on certain issues. This has led to the erosion of the checks and balances that are necessary for a healthy democracy. Populism has also led to a decrease in democratic participation and the rise of an authoritarian style of governance. The lack of accountability and transparency in the government has further weakened the nation's democratic system. Although populism can be a useful tool for mobilizing public support, it should be used in a way that does not undermine democratic principles. Overall, the rise of populism in India has had a negative impact on the country's democratic system. To ensure that democracy continues to flourish in India, it is important for the government to take steps to ensure that populist policies are used in a responsible way. Additionally, it is necessary for the public to be vigilant and hold the government accountable for its actions. Only when the people are able to exercise their political rights can democracy thrive in India.

The rise of populism in India is having a significant effect on democracy in the country. Populist politicians are utilizing their rhetoric to entice the masses and are often exploiting socio-economic divides to promote their own agendas. This has led to a

¹⁹ *Combating Populism*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 4, 2022, from <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/combating-populism>

rise in political polarization, and an increase in the use of hate speech and incitement of violence. Moreover, populist policies have been shown to limit the scope of democracy, as they often prioritize the interests of certain groups over the collective interests of society. Ultimately, it is clear that the rise of populism in India is having a detrimental effect on democracy in the country. The rise of populism has led to increased political polarization, the use of hate speech, and the promotion of policies that limit democratic processes. As such, it is essential that the Indian government takes steps to address the issue and protect the principles of democracy in the country.

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