



[How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?](#)

# Rise, Fall and Repeat

The Story of Centrism in India

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There have been notable changes in India's political landscape over recent decades, with the rise of Hindu nationalism and social polarisation overshadowing long-standing centrist traditions and eroding important components of the "world's largest democracy". Will the results of the 2024 election be an opportunity to return to a more moderate approach?

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Over the past decade, the rise of populism has been a dominant force in politics and political analysis across the globe. In an age of heightened polarisation aided by widespread use of social media, centrist politics have struggled to satisfy voters' demands and set the political agenda. India represents an important case for understanding this global phenomenon for two reasons. Firstly, India is relevant as the world's largest democracy and fifth-largest economy, a forward-looking country vying for a greater role in the geopolitical sphere. Secondly, and most importantly, is the ascendancy of right-wing populism in the country, which has quietly grown alongside centrist politics but has overshadowed the latter in more recent times.

Since its independence in 1947, centrism has been a bedrock of India's polity. The plurality of Indian society, culture and politics has largely called for a centrist approach to the country's overall governance. Accommodation, appeasement, welfarism and emancipation have been key pillars of the country's centrist policy framework, while having also been key determinants of major electoral victories in India.

The victory of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the general elections of 2014, when Narendra Modi first became Prime Minister, changed the composition of centrist politics in the country. Modi's BJP borrows heavily from the centrist fabric and also imbues it with its distinct saffron hue of Hindu nationalism. The BJP presents itself as a platform catering to all Indians, whereas in all cultural and religious aspects the party is clearly biased

towards the 80 per cent of Indians who belong to the Hindu majority. In general terms, Hindu nationalism promises the creation of a state that adheres to cultural and spiritual traditions of Hinduism. The stronger the polity subscribes to these principles, the more likely it will be that non-Hindu parts of the population become marginalised and disenfranchised.

Populism in the Indian context can take different forms, three of which are discussed in this article. The first is the idea of empowering underprivileged groups to defy a perceived social and political elite. The second denotes a polarising dynamic between different social and religious groups with the intention of creating a sentiment of "us-versus-them". The third is the promise of material benefits to certain population groups. The latter can be seen as one of the tipping points between centrism and populism: economic welfare programmes such as direct bank transfers of cash, construction of houses and household amenities, water connections and distribution of gas cylinders are a centrist staple of Indian politics because they benefit the mainstream of the Indian population. Having said that, such policy items can easily acquire a populist flavour when virtually all political parties try to outbid each other's campaign promises regarding economic welfare or single out certain groups for quick electoral gains.

India's multi-party system is as diverse as the country itself. In the general elections concluded on 4 June 2024, as many as 744 political parties contested for seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament, of which over 30

had won at least one seat in the previous election of 2019. These include two pole-position parties – namely the Indian National Congress (INC or Congress for short) and the Bharatiya Janata Party – which, between them, have led most national governments since independence. Congress has its roots in India’s struggle for independence and is closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi and the Nehru-Gandhi family. The BJP, for its part, has emerged from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh<sup>1</sup> (RSS), a group founded in 1925 that the United States Library of Congress describes as a “right-wing Hindu-nationalist, paramilitary, volunteer and allegedly militant organization”.<sup>2</sup> Most other parties on the list of 30 are closely linked to one or two specific federal states of India, such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) in the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh; Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar; Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu; Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal among many others. These parties usually champion policies tailored to the local populations. Importantly, in an era of coalition politics it is regional parties that tip the scales at national level.

### **Steering Through the High Winds of Independence on a Centrist Course**

The BJP is the strongest political force in India today. The image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, often against a backdrop of the BJP’s saffron colours and lotus symbol, is a ubiquitous feature of everyday life. And yet the Indian National Congress, the main opposition party to Modi’s BJP, has the strongest claim to being the most influential party shaping India since its independence in 1947. Within this 77-year period, the INC has headed the central government for 54 years, featuring six Prime Ministers. The party was founded in 1885 and became strongly associated with Mahatma Gandhi and the struggle for independence. An integral part of this effort was the INC’s ability to project inclusiveness to the different sections of Indian society. Even though most of its members hailed from the majority Hindu faith, it represented a wide range of religions, castes and economic classes. This big tent

image was upheld after India achieved independence in 1947, and Congress decisively won the first national election of 1952. The clear overarching goal of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was to lead the new-born Republic of India out of poverty through “collective development”: dams and steel plants were the temples of the new India, Nehru was quoted as saying.<sup>3</sup> From its earliest days, the Congress-led government of India embarked on a project that addressed every member of society.

### **The policy brand that Nehru stood for later became known as developmental nationalism.**

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The policy brand that Nehru stood for later became known as developmental nationalism. The population subscribed to the idea of jointly pursuing the goal of a self-determined, prosperous nation, which, over the course of Nehru’s three terms as Prime Minister, created the notion of the INC as India’s natural governing force. Congress not only adopted an inclusive policy agenda and broad outreach, it also emphasised the accommodation of different interests and the provision of welfare programmes to disadvantaged groups. As a centrist government, it clearly had to cater to the Hindu majority and burnish its own Hindu credentials, while also carefully heeding the concerns of religious minorities.

Balancing these interests earned Nehru the distinction of being seen as the architect of a secular Indian state. In India’s federal system, some ambitious policies also had to be shelved to appease state governments. When Nehru aimed to establish Hindi as India’s only national language, backlash from non-Hindi speaking states was so strong that the central government compromised and established English alongside Hindi as India’s official language. During the first chapter of India’s modern history, Congress embodied centrism and





successfully portrayed itself as the only party capable of aggregating and converging the various interests of India's pluralist society.

Under Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, Indian politics took a populist turn. During her first tenure as Prime Minister, from 1966 until 1977, she mobilised support through a left-leaning and at times socialist policy agenda, and relied on her personality to generate political appeal.<sup>4</sup> When faced with secessionist movements in Punjab and Kashmir during her second term in power from 1980 until 1984, she portrayed the Sikh and Muslim insurgents as threats to national integrity that only she as a defender of Hindu faith and her party could stand up to. Although this style of politics became known as unitary nationalism, some commentators argue that it was in this period that Indira Gandhi laid the groundwork for a securitised, anti-minority discourse and "us-versus-them" populism, which came to bear during the recent BJP-led governments.<sup>5</sup>

### **The rise of the BJP brought about a more sustained erosion of centrism.**

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#### **No Longer the Sole National Party: the BJP Honed Its Ideological Edge to Rival Congress**

The centrist profile of Congress became dented as it had to deal with mounting challenges from both within and outside. The rise of the BJP, however, brought about a more sustained erosion of centrism in India. The Hindu-nationalist party began in 1980 as a breakaway faction of the Janata Party.<sup>6</sup> However, the BJP's deeper roots lie in the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS, 1951

Two-time Prime Minister: Under Indira Gandhi, Indian politics took a populist turn. Some commentators argue that she laid the groundwork for a securitised, anti-minority discourse and "us-versus-them" populism that came to bear during the recent BJP-led governments.

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to 1977), then known as the political arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. This heritage is bound by the core ideology of nationalism, and specifically Hindu nationalism.

However, the ideology did not witness an ascent in the initial years of the BJP. The party started with a moderate approach<sup>7</sup> to project continuity from the Janata Party days. This



The winners? BJP supporters celebrate after the 2024 election, in which the party won the most votes. However, the result was much weaker than many expected and the BJP needs to rely on coalition partners with different ideological standpoints to run the government. Photo: © Pradeep Gaur, Sipa USA, SOPA Images, picture alliance.

attempt to build an alternate centrist platform resulted in massive electoral disappointment during its first national elections of 1984, after which the BJP steered towards hardline Hindu

nationalism. The BJP found its calling with the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement<sup>8</sup> – a movement for the construction of a temple in honour of Lord Ram, a Hindu deity, on the disputed site of a mosque in the state of Uttar Pradesh. As momentum for the temple grew, so did the BJP's electoral fortunes in the subsequent national elections, transforming it into a formidable political force across the country.

### The quota system became a defining theme in Indian politics at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Two noteworthy events took place alongside the temple movement: the liberalisation of the Indian economy (1991) and the adoption of the Mandal Commission report (1992) for the inclusion of socially and economically disadvantaged communities in public service and education by means of a quota system.<sup>9</sup> The advocacy of the quota system and its final implementation thwarted the BJP's temple politics as it empowered several regional parties with policy objectives centred on this system. This was especially the case in the Hindi heartland that comprises much of the country's north and is the BJP's main support base. When looking at the bigger picture, quotas were meant to serve a centrist purpose. Alongside their goal to facilitate positive social mobility, the policy inadvertently created new constituencies and became a defining theme in Indian politics at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Quotas were designed to enable a range of marginalised groups – which, taken together, amount to a sizeable proportion of the population – to compete with the majority. While many viewed the quotas as an improvement, they also opened up a number of opportunities for populists to either challenge or defend the system's beneficiaries.

The 1990s became the decade of coalition politics in India. Regional parties punched



above their weight while the colossal entities of Congress and BJP failed to stand on their own. Whereas Congress was clearly in decline from its past stature in this decade, the BJP was in ascent but far from being dominant. The latter gained the upper hand from Congress in 1996, but needed alliance partners to form the government in 1996, 1998 and 1999. The BJP's dependency on alliance partners, most of whom rejected its Hindu majoritarian ideology, forced the party to revert to a more moderate stance. Having compromised on its ideological approach, it finally managed to lead a full-tenured government from 1999 to 2004. This decade not only curbed the BJP's Hindutva ascent, whose aim is a Hinduisation of the state and all its cultural and social aspects, but also symbolised how Indian politics can return to a centrist pattern.

### **Modi's public persona outshone virtually all other leaders in the BJP and across the country.**

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The era of coalition politics continued as Congress clawed its way back up to surpass the BJP and lead a government known as United Progressive Alliance (UPA) for two terms from 2004 to 2014. In this period, the BJP faced a structural and political decline. Its loss in two subsequent general elections of 2004 and 2009 pushed two of its flag-bearing leaders into semi-retirement. The resulting vacuum was filled by the BJP's then Chief Minister (CM) for the state of Gujarat, Narendra Modi.

The early years of Modi's tenure as CM were defined by the 2002 Gujarat riots between Hindus and Muslims. While the riots severely impacted his public image, he managed to climb the ranks of the BJP and the RSS due to a combination of tenacity and skilful political manoeuvring and went on to govern the state for twelve years. While the polarising brand of populism was one of Modi's key planks to get

re-elected, he strongly intended to build his political profile around development and aspiration.

Modi's rise within the BJP and across the country was inversely proportional to the declining approval of the UPA government, especially in its second term (2009 to 2014). Financial scandals, domestic security concerns and widespread protests backed the government into a corner and gave rise to a collective call for change. In the midst of this, Modi came across as the right man at the right time as his Gujarat resume and public persona outshone virtually all other leaders in the BJP and across the country. Yet, Modi and the BJP were mindful that the rise in their fortunes was due to their pitch for development and overall aspiration, not their ideology. They therefore adopted an all-inclusive approach with a primary focus on the theme of developmental and aspirational India – not too far removed from Nehru's original ideas, but with the marked difference that, within this framework, the party's ideology of Hindu nationalism found its wings once again.

### **The BJP's Populist Playbook**

In the decade leading up to 2024, the BJP's practice of populist politics can be viewed through three lenses: first, BJP's active targeting of the politically ascending marginal classes, which implies a challenge to a political elite perceived as dominated by Congress and which has lost touch with ordinary people. Second, an increasingly targeted take on welfarism designed to bank votes. Third, social and religious polarisation, with a clear fault line between Hindu and Muslim groups. Hindu nationalism can be understood as a superstructure in which various other policies take shape. It is fuelled by never-ending invocations of India's great ancient civilisation and contrasted with denunciations of eras when the country was subjugated by foreign invaders; in the BJP's understanding, this includes both the British colonisers and the Mughals, who were Muslim. Expressions of Hindu nationalism are intrinsically social

and cultural as its proponents create friction between Hindus and Muslims in all aspects of life from inter-religious marriages to food choices and religious practices. It reached a climax in January this year when construction of the long-promised temple in honour of Lord Ram was finally completed. The BJP intended the consecration of the temple to be a rallying cry for Hindus across the nation to back the BJP in the national election.

The BJP's support was traditionally sourced from richer, more urban middle-class and upper-caste populations. However, this base has never been enough to propel the BJP to form a government of its own. From 2014, the BJP has attempted to make inroads in India's marginalised and rural population. The marginalised population includes the non-upper caste and tribal population, whose regional strongholds and representational political parties have enabled them to gain strong political momentum since the 1990s. Their historical struggles against the dominant upper caste population almost virtually make them non-BJP voters. The BJP has attempted to tackle that aversion with the help of two specific tools – aspirational politics and Hindu nationalism. With the former, the focus lies on boosting the country's growth trajectory through developmental work and advancing individual growth through jobs.

### **The convergence of aspiration and welfarism is an attempt to blur the caste and class barriers.**

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This politics of national and individual aspiration has been combined with a heavy dose of welfarism – primarily a tool of centrist politics as welfare programmes address the whole population; however, one which can take on a populist guise when geared towards specific constituencies or amplified to the point of drowning out virtually anything else.

Welfarism is by no means new to India: job guarantee schemes, a focus on the supply of public goods, such as health and education, have all had plenty of airtime. Whereas under Modi and his BJP, welfarism has taken a novel turn. Their “New Welfarism”<sup>10</sup> entails the subsidised public provision of essential goods and services normally provided by the private sector, such as bank accounts, cooking gas, toilets, electricity, housing and more recently water and plain cash. Over the past decade, Modi's government has set up the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism to funnel more than 300 billion euros of welfare payments to the population.<sup>11</sup> Still, New Welfarism does not guarantee political immortality to Modi and the BJP, as it has inspired enough political and social goodwill for it to be emulated by various other political parties across Indian states.

The convergence of aspiration and welfarism is a conscious attempt to blur the heavily entrenched caste and class barriers and promote the image of a larger Hindu family of voters. The ubiquitous backdrop of Hindu nationalism allows the BJP to hold on to their traditional voters from urban middle-class and upper-caste populations with relative ease. This section of the population does not call for an aspirational form of politics on day-to-day life matters, but rather seeks an overarching aspiration for Indians, the Indian nation and, not least, for Hindus at large. The BJP's consistent theme is quite simple: to empower the majority which, according to the party, has been disadvantaged for decades. It has targeted the opposition and especially Congress by portraying them as part of an elite system that has promoted “pseudo-secularism” in which it supposedly only favours minorities (Muslims) and neglects the country's religious majority: the Hindus.

### **As India Embarks on Modi 3.0, Will the Pendulum Swing Back to Centristism?**

India has come a long way since its independence and much of its success was arguably built on a centrist policy agenda broadly based

on economic development. Under Modi's government, India has made significant economic advances, while also creating a more polarised social and political atmosphere.

The interplay between a centrist tradition on the one hand, and populist inroads on countless themes on the other, makes the Indian case both intriguing and challenging. The elements of caste, class, religion, languages and cultures have constituted the basic fabric of India since its inception. This will sustain a breeding ground for most populist tendencies of the Indian polity. The challenge lies in tackling the exclusionary nature that is an inherent feature of populism, and which has become more pronounced over the past decade. Populism, which in India polarises society based on religious identities, labels people as nationalist or anti-national, denies basic human rights to critics of the ruling elites, and has weakened the functioning of media, legislature and judiciary, needs to be kept in check so as to counter the risk of a permanent erosion of democratic mechanisms.

The results of the 2024 general elections could provide an opportunity for a return to centrism, as the BJP was humbled by a much lower mandate than it was aiming for. In its third consecutive term, it needs to rely on coalition partners with different ideological standpoints in order to run the government. Faced with this reality, a weakened BJP will probably no longer be able to steamroll policies through parliament and will strike a more conciliatory tone in its political messaging. Leaving a sharply polarised campaign behind, the opposition will use its newly gained strength in parliament to challenge the government on political substance.

The last decade has been defined by a mismatch between a successful centrist economic agenda and an exclusionary trajectory in the social, religious and cultural spheres. As the BJP and its coalition partners steer India into the next chapter of its impressive development story, much could be gained from a deeper assessment of the nation's overall social fabric. How

best to balance out the needs and concerns of its various groups, rather than claim ideological supremacy for one, will be a central task for generations to come.

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