Contemporary Populism in India: Assessing the Bharatiya Janata Party’s Ideological Features

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Abstract

This paper analyses the ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with the aim of characterizing populism in contemporary India. In fact, while the great majority of the research on the topic has pointed its attention towards either the US and Europe or South America, very little work has been done on other regions, and most of it has focused on populist leaders, rather than populist parties. Understanding populism as an ideology whose core principles are people-centrism and anti-elitism, this study conducts a qualitative content analysis of the BJP’s electoral manifestos, and integrates the main findings with interviews conducted with 13 party officials. I assess firstly whether the party can be labelled as populist, and secondly its position alongside the left-right political spectrum, by looking at six distinctive features drawn from the literature on right-wing and left-wing populism: “the people”, “the elites”, “the others”, authoritarianism, egalitarianism, and internationalism. Party literature and interviews show that the BJP is a populist party which combines elements from both ideologies; however, the way it conceptualizes “the people”, “the elites” and “the others” is clearly nativist, and in the interviews its right-wing positions emerge even more visibly. I conclude that the scholarship should address more cases from the Asian or African continents, to assess whether a sort of “southern” populism is emerging in the Global South which adopts nativist stances, while remaining attached to its post-colonial ideological roots. Moreover, the paper highlights an overlooked type of internationalism that the BJP professes, that towards the Indian diaspora.

Keywords: Populism; political parties; left-right political spectrum; Indian domestic politics; BJP.
1. INTRODUCTION

Populism is not a new political phenomenon; neither is populism in India. Nevertheless, nowadays its salience is higher than ever, since its reach has expanded across the globe: within the European Union, right-wing populist parties have considerably increased their electoral success; in South America, although populism has always been traditionally inclusive and left-wing, leaders like Bolsonaro in Brazil are introducing new trends worthy of attention; and in Asia, not only the world’s largest democracy, India, is ruled by a populist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but we can also witness populist actors in power in several other countries.

As of now, the BJP has not been approached as a populist party by the scholarship.¹ In fact, while the great majority of research on populism has focused on the US, Europe and South America, the Indo-Pacific region, and India in particular, have been somewhat neglected, with the exception of studies concerning populist leaders (i.e. Duterte in the Philippines, Widodo in Indonesia) rather than populist parties. This shortcoming is difficult to comprehend, especially if considering that the BJP, in power since 2014 and allegedly the world’s largest political party in terms of membership (The Economic Times, 2015), is commonly portrayed as a right-wing populist party, and Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi as the perfect example of a populist leader.

Consequently, this paper investigates how to characterize populism in contemporary India by looking at the ideology of the political party in power, the BJP, to see firstly whether it can be defined as populist, and secondly how it can be collocated within the left-right political spectrum. It does so by conducting a content analysis of electoral party manifestos published by the BJP since its birth in 1980, and by integrating the main findings with interviews carried out with 13 party officials.

Studying populism nowadays is extremely relevant, and not only because the populist wave is affecting the whole world, but also because, for the core principles it embodies, populism represents a threat to liberal democracy (Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2017). As power is slowly but constantly moving towards East and our system turning multipolar, the shift towards populism observed lately within Asian democracies cannot be underestimated, especially in India. India is not only a well-consolidated democracy playing a major role within the Indo-Pacific region, but also a country which is projected to become a global power, both economically and demographically, in a few decades; consequently, the political dynamics that are currently evolving there should receive more attention. Ultimately, this paper attempts to provide new incentives for comparative research on populism between this and other regions of the world.

2. THE IDEATIONAL APPROACH TO POPULISM

During the last three decades many approaches have unfolded to define populism and study it empirically, reflecting the increasing salience of this political phenomenon observed particularly in two

¹ Recent noteworthy exceptions are McDonnell and Cabrera (2018); Plagemann and Destradi (2018); and Wojczewski (2019).
regions: South America and Europe (Kaltwasser et al, 2017). Populism has not only been interpreted as an ideology (Mudde, 2004; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008), but also as a discursive construction (De La Torre, 2000; Kazin, 1995; Laclau, 2005), a strategy (Jansen, 2011; Madrid, 2008; Taggart, 1995; Weyland, 2001), or a political style (Moffitt, 2016). Nevertheless, the emerging consensus is to treat populism as a set of ideas, in the form of either a discourse or an ideology (Hawkins et al, 2012); ultimately, it represents a mental map to comprehend the political realm (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Accordingly, this paper examines populism as an ideology. Its main objective is to investigate the populist nature of a political party, the BJP, instead of focusing on the communicative style or the performance of a specific leader. Notwithstanding the popularity of Narendra Modi, the BJP is not a personal party, and has a strongly entrenched organization well-connected at the grassroots level (McDonnell and Cabrera, 2018). Moreover, Chhibber and Verma (2018) recently demonstrated that in the Indian context ideology still represents a crucial factor in party politics and elections, not only in terms of voters’ behaviour but also for the very survival of any political party.

Within this theoretical framework, widely accepted is the definition provided by Mudde (2004: 543), for whom it represents a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.” People-centrism and anti-elitism are essential elements shared by all types of populism (Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2015); in addition to this, populist forces are also necessarily anti-pluralist, because they claim to be the only true and legitimate representatives of the people, and the only ones that can make democracy work (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Müller, 2016). Ultimately, they embed the political realm into a moral dimension, where the people are good and morally pure, whereas the elites are evil and corrupt (Hawkins, 2010; Müller, 2016). The latter are accused of taking away power from the former, bringing to a deterioration of the democratic system and working against the interests of the people themselves. In addition to this, the “general will” of the people is under threat not only because of the elites, but also “from the presence of ‘others’ within society who do not share the identity and/or values of the people” (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: 4).

Since populism represents a thin ideology, the meaning of “the elites” and “the others” will be different on the basis of those thick ideologies which are found alongside it. Even though nowadays the distinction is more blurred than in the past, the general agreement in the literature remains that the two major ideologies found are right-wing and left-wing populism.2 Mudde’s study focuses on populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in Europe. These parties present three main features: populism, as defined above;
nativism, understood as "an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation"), and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state>> (Mudde, 2007: 22); and authoritarianism, "the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely>> (Mudde, 2007: 23). PRRPs embrace an exclusionary view of the society: "the people" are defined on an ethnic or cultural basis, while "the others", meaning those who do not belong to the nation and threaten its existence, are usually identified with ethnic or religious minorities and immigrants. On the other side of the spectrum, populist radical left parties (PRLPs) still maintain the dichotomy between "moral people" and "corrupt elite", but they emphasize socialist values such as egalitarianism and internationalism, whereas capitalism, neoliberalism and neo-imperialism are regarded as the enemies to be fought in order to give power back to the people and restore real democracy (March, 2011). In most cases, these parties adopt an inclusive view of the society, and define "the people" in terms of social class, referring to the poor or the proletariat.

3. METHODOLOGY

The analytical strategies for operationalizing and measuring the concept change considerably according to the particular definition of populism which one chooses to adopt. When populism is understood as a political ideology, its empirical study is usually conducted through either qualitative (Mudde, 2007; Kaltwasser and Mudde, 2012) or quantitative (Pauwels, 2011; Roodujin and Pauwels, 2011) analyses of texts belonging to the party literature, i.e. party manifestos. For those who see populism as a discursive style, the most common approach results in an interpretative analysis of party leaders’ public speeches (Kazin, 1995; Panizza, 2005); while scholars looking at populism as a form of political strategy rely mainly on comparative historical analyses among specific case studies (Roberts, 2006; Jansen, 2011).

Following the first trend, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of the nine party manifestos published by the BJP since its establishment in 1980. These manifestos have been issued before all the general elections occurred in India between 1984 and 2019, and have been written by ad hoc Manifesto Committees usually consisting of party’s top leaders, key ministers and national spokespeople. Since they are electoral manifestos, they expose not only the core ideological features of the party, but also pragmatic provisions which address a variety of issues, from welfare schemes to foreign policy. Considering the literature mentioned above, I derived the following set of questions to analyze how the BJP refers to these elements, and to assess whether the party can fit any of the two ideological categories.

Independently from any ideology, the two core principles of populism are people-centrism and anti-elitism. However, as mentioned above, we can distinguish between right-wing and left-wing populism on the basis of how “the people” and “the elites” are characterized: the former will define these concepts on an ethnocultural ground, the latter on a social class ground. Therefore questions 1 and 2 ask:
Q1: How are “the people” defined?
Q2: How are “the elites” defined?

According to the host ideology, the perceived main threats (“the others”) to the people can vary. I expect the main threat for a PRRP to be all those elements not belonging to the native group, i.e. ethnic minorities and immigrants; whereas for PRLPs, to be capitalist, neoliberal and neo-imperialist actors. With this distinction in mind, question 3 is:
Q3: What are the main threats to the people?

To go more in-depth within each ideology, I then approached their key features. For right-wing populism, these are nativism and authoritarianism; however, nativism is already addressed by Q1 and Q3. Therefore, this set of questions only tackles authoritarianism, as defined by Mudde (2007):
Q4: Does the party believe that violations of authority must be punished severely?

Finally, for left-wing populism, the following two questions address egalitarianism and internationalism, as described by March (2011):
Q5: Does the party emphasize the importance of outright equality/economic redistribution?
Q6: Does the party seek cross-national networking/solidarity?

Table 3.1: Main features of right-wing and left-wing populist ideologies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>“The people”</th>
<th>“The others”</th>
<th>Ideological features</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Right-wing populism</strong></td>
<td>nation defined on an ethnic basis (native group)</td>
<td>non-native elements: ethnic or religious minorities, immigrants</td>
<td>Nativism, authoritarianism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Left-wing populism</strong></td>
<td>nation defined on a class basis (the poor / the proletariat)</td>
<td>capitalist, neoliberal, neo-imperialist forces</td>
<td>Egalitarianism, internationalism</td>
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After the analysis of party manifestos, the main findings were integrated with interviews with members of the BJP, to provide a more accurate picture of the BJP’s populist ideology. I interviewed 13 people belonging to various sections of the party: officers from the National Executive Committee, Parliament, Supreme Court, Policy Research Department, Foreign Department, Youth Wing, representatives from academia and media, and national spokespeople. Almost all my interviewees were male apart from two females, and even though all were resident in New Delhi, apart from one living in Uttar Pradesh, their geographical backgrounds differed considerably, from West Bengal to Kerala. The respondents were identified and contacted through the “snowball” mechanism, and the interviews were conducted.

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3 The table is built on a summary of the work of Mudde (2007) and March (2011). Surely within each type there can be some degree of variation, but generally they can be exemplified as such.
between November 2018 and February 2019 in New Delhi. I used semi-structured interviews with questions related to concepts of people, elites, threats to the nation, authoritarianism, egalitarianism and internationalism, but often the interviews touched on other issues, such as the figure of PM Modi or Indian democracy in general. As a methodological tool, they were extremely helpful in allowing access to the BJP’s ideological principles in-depth: in fact, in comparison to the manifestos, the nativist and authoritarian positions of the party emerged much more clearly.

4. THE RISE OF THE BJP IN INDIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS

Any account of the BJP would be incomplete without mentioning the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an Hindu nationalist volunteer organisation which is widely recognised as its ideological parent. The RSS is a hierarchical, cadre-based movement founded in 1925 and associated with the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella of Hindu outfits ranging from political associations to civil society organisations, all committed to the Hindutva (or Hindu nationalist) ideology. It was created as a response to the perceived increasing pan-Islamism spreading among the Muslim minority, during years which witnessed several outbreaks of violence addressed against Hindu communities. The main objective of the RSS was to re-affirm the grandiosity of the Hindu civilisation, and to constitute a new Hindu nation uniting all Hindus irrespectively of castes or regional divisions. This project excluded not only non-Indians, but also all those Indians professing a religion which did not see its birth in the territory of India - namely, all religions apart from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism.

Even though the RSS has always declared itself as apolitical, almost all the senior leaders of the BJP have been members of the RSS, and the RSS selects all the top appointments within the party’s leadership. The RSS’s access to political power dates back to the early 1950s. After Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a former RSS member and the organisation was banned, the RSS realised its isolation in the political system and decided to form a party, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS). At the beginning, the BJS was more interested in reforming the society rather pursuing political ambitions, pushing for policies such as the protection of cows or the promotion of Ayurveda medicine. However, it gradually became more involved in coalition politics. In the late 1970s, the party merged with the Janata Party (JP) and started to gain higher shares of votes, arriving to form a government under the JP in 1977. In those years, the Hindutva agenda pushed by the RSS became broader, involving attacks towards religious minorities and the revision of history textbooks to give a better portrait of the Hindu civilisation; however, the new JP was the combination of several parties, of which many did not agree with such radical stances. These events were concomitant with an increased violence between Hindus and Muslims, which resulted in a split in the party. During the 1980 elections, the JP failed miserably, and former members from the BJS decided to create a new party, the BJP.

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4 The main information for the following paragraphs are taken from Khilnani (2010); Jaffrelot (2010); and Hasan (2010).
The early 1980s saw a revival of violence between Hindu and Muslim communities. This context constituted a unique opportunity for the BJP to mobilise voters by adopting even more hard-line Hindutva positions, of which the most significant example is the campaign for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. Over the next fifteen years the party’s popularity increased considerably, and the BJP shifted from being a small political actor present in a few states to representing a major political force at the national level. The Congress Party (from now on, the Congress) was soon overshadowed in the elections of the late 90s, and for the first time in 1999 the BJP led a coalition government known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The party came to power by rejecting secularism, adopting an harsh anti-Muslim rhetoric and advocating for Hindutva militancy (Heath, 1999); and between 1999 and 2004, it was able to partly implement its Hindutva agenda, for instance in the field of education, by conducting an “hinduisation” of school curricula and rewriting history textbooks (Lall, 2005). However, it failed to deliver its core pledges regarding the construction of a Ram temple and the abrogation of article 370 of the Indian constitution, which gives a special status to the state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K); and it was defeated by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in the 2004 elections.

For two consecutive mandates the UPA ruled the country, but it was unable to address important structural problems related to inequality and unemployment; furthermore, it got involved in a series of corruption scandals, and the combination of these elements paved the way for BJP’s outstanding electoral comeback in 2014. This victory represented a landmark in the history of Indian domestic politics, and was driven by several factors: the charismatic figure of Narendra Modi, and his success in delivering outstanding growth in Gujarat while he was the state’s chief minister; the BJP’s ability to attract the most unprivileged sections of the society; the back-up of the RSS’s machine; and the party’s ideological appeal, which won the support of almost one third of the whole Indian population (Jha, 2017). The main features of this ideology are exposed in the next section.

5. THE BJP’S IDEOLOGY: BETWEEN HINDUTVA AND DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL

The analysis of the election manifestos shows that the BJP combines core principles from both right-wing and left-wing populism. Even though at first sight its conception of “the people” reflects a leftist perspective embracing all social groups, especially the most disadvantaged, an in-depth reading of other

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5 Ayodhya is a city of Uttar Pradesh which is thought to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. During the XVI century, the first Mughal emperor of India built a mosque in this holy site where allegedly an Hindu temple was located, and since then a dispute raised between Hindus and Muslims on which group has the right to worship there. During the 80s, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), another group belonging to the Sangh Parivar, started a campaign to reclaim the place for Hindus and to build a Ram temple. The dispute touched its peak in December 1992, when a rally organised by the VHP and the BJP degenerated into the demolition of the mosque, and more than 2000 people were killed in the consequent riots.

6 The other big national party, dominating the domestic political scene since the 19th century. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, it led India to independence from the British Empire.

7 According to this article, J&K citizens are subject to a different set of laws, concerning citizenship, fundamental rights and ownership of property, among others.
categories, such as “the elites” or “the others”, or of some of the policies it advocates for, portrays its nativist position. For what concerns “authoritarianism”, the results are not clear: the two elements which could suggest a particularly authoritarian stance are the adoption of harsh measures to fight terrorism, and the intolerance towards anti-national discourses and practices. “Egalitarianism” is a basic tenet of the party’s ideology: in fact, its socio-economic agenda, which aims at a major redistribution of resources, has great relevance in the manifestos. “Internationalism” does not appear in the form of party-to-party contacts, but it is professed through the BJP’s adherence to the global justice movement. In addition to this, the party is greatly concerned with strengthening its ties with the Indian diaspora.

The interviews I conducted confirm the findings drawn from the analysis of the manifestos, but in comparison to the party literature, they emphasize more clearly the BJP’s nativist and authoritarian positions, therefore highlighting its right-wing nature.

5.1 “The People”

Originally the BJP was surely nationalist, but not populist. In the first manifestos, the concept of Indian “nation” is much more relevant than that of “the people”; a populist turn occurs partially in 1996, when both people-centrism and anti-elitism make their appearance; however, it is only in 2014 that the BJP becomes a textbook populist party. From the beginning, though, it is possible to distinguish those whom the party considers as “the people”. These are all Indians, regardless of their caste, religion or language. All groups, including minorities, must be guaranteed equal justice and development. Throughout the years, emphasis is increasingly given to the most unprivileged sections of the population, namely Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). From 1996, the “economically weaker sections” of the population, meaning those belonging to upper castes but not wealthy, are also added. In 2014, the BJP states that it is committed to form a <<government of the poor, marginalized and left behind>> (BJP, 2014: 10). This is in line with what in 1996 is portrayed as the “social philosophy” of the party: integral humanism, which aims at eradicating social and economic disparities. Such thinking reflects the description of left-wing populism given by March (2011: 370), with its emphasis on <<egalitarianism and the espousal of collective economic and social rights>>.

What appears as an inclusive conceptualization of “the people” on a class basis, though, hides some hints of a nativist stance, particularly in relation to three key provisions: the abrogation of article 370, the ban on cow slaughter and the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya. The BJP is against article 370 because it <<psychologically separates J&K state from the rest of the country>> (BJP, 1991: 321); sense of identity and feelings of the Kashmiri do not seem to be a source of concern for the party, which promotes a very homogeneous idea of the Indian nation embedded in the words, often repeated: “One Nation, One People and One Culture”. This feature represents a basic principle of populism: “the people” are understood as a homogeneous entity. As Urbinati (2017: 574) explains, populism merges

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8 SCs and STs are groups recognized by the Constitution as historically disadvantaged, while OBCs as educationally or socially disadvantaged.
<the interests existing within society into a unified meaning that holds for the whole>. Similarly, in regard to cow slaughter, cow protection is described as <<one of the basic tenets of Indian culture>> (BJP, 1989: 369), despite the fact that only Hindus consider it as a holy animal which cannot be eaten, and not even all of them - in the North East, for example, beef is commonly consumed among the population. This position therefore favors just a specific section of the Indian population: the Hindu majority. Finally, the question of the Ram temple opens the 1991 manifesto, where it is defined as a national issue involving <<cultural heritage and nation self-respect>> (BJP, 1991: 323); however, this stand completely disregards the fact that a mosque has been located there since the XVI century, and represents a major site of worship for Indian Muslims.

In 1996, Hindutva is mentioned for the first time as the guiding ideology of the party, but it is only clearly enunciated in 1998. Hindutva is <<this cultural heritage which is central to all regions, religions and languages, is a civilizational identity and constitutes the cultural nationalism of India>> (BJP, 1998: 146). It is described as the solution to the creation of vote banks9 and the so-called “politics of appeasement” implemented by previous governments towards certain groups. To these electoral mechanisms, the BJP opposes the notion of “positive secularism”, illustrated in the slogan “Justice for all, appeasement of none”: the main concept behind it is that citizens should not be distinguished on the basis of their religion, and that the Indian population, again, constitutes a homogeneous bloc. However, it is not clear how this idea of “One Nation, One People” can be harmonized with the party’s commitment to protecting minorities: in fact, in 2004 the BJP openly affirms that it seeks no distinction between majority and minorities in politics; while in 2009, that the concept of minority perpetuates discrimination and victimhood, reinforcing the perception of a separate identity. Opposition to political pluralism and protection of minorities represents a distinctive feature of PRRPs, which have a radical interpretation of the majoritarian rule and are against minority rights (Mudde, 2007; Huber and Schimpf, 2017).

The interviews confirm what could already be partially deducted from the party literature: the BJP’s dominant conception of “the people” is that of a PRRP. “The people” are defined on a nativist basis (Indians or Hindus) and are understood as a homogeneous entity; minorities are disregarded in favor of a majoritarian rule.

All 13 interviewees agree that “the people” the BJP refers to are either Indian or Hindu people. Here it is important to underline that the term “Hindu” is not necessarily related to the religion of Hinduism, but it alludes more to a civilizational feature: Hindus are all those individuals whose motherland is India, whose loyalty goes towards this country and who have a common ancestry rooted in the Indian territory. Hindus therefore include Muslims, Christians and other minorities, because in spite of the “Muslim invasions” started in the XI century and the more recent Christian conversions, the cultural origins

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9 Blocs of voters belonging to the same community who consistently vote for the same political party during the elections. For example, the Muslim vote bank is thought to back the Congress.
remain the same. Prafulla Ketkar, Chief Editor of RSS’s most important publication, *Organiser*, emphasizes that Hindus represent a culturally homogeneous entity. In this sense, most interviewees report that the BJP is not an anti-Muslim party as it is portrayed by the media or other political parties, and on the contrary it is committed to the development of all Indian people, regardless of caste, religion, or region; more specifically, many highlight that BJP policies address those who are at the bottom of the social ladder.

Nevertheless, some admit that a special regard is given to the Hindu community (in religious sense). Anirban Ganguly, member of the BJP Policy Research Department, affirms: <<The BJP is not a Hindu nationalist party. Still, it is a nationalist party, and since the majority of the country is Hindu, we need to be sensitive to Hindu issues>>. Lalitha Kumaramangalam, BJP former National Secretary, explains that the BJP has finally given a voice to Hindus which was not conceded by previous governments, focused only on the appeasement of minorities and the creation of vote banks to get electoral gains. Especially for what concerns Muslims, the general agreement is that during the past decades the Congress has done nothing but “dividing and ruling” the population, giving many concessions to Muslims, but this mechanism did not translate into better conditions for their community, which remains among the most backwards; this kind of politics is thought to have created major polarization within the society. On the opposite side, the BJP is committed to avoid that, by guaranteeing “welfare to all, appeasement to none”, as Amibath Sinha, from the BJP National Executive Committee, argues. In this regard, it is interesting to notice that two interviewees affirm that minorities should not be given special rights at all, since they are citizens as everyone else. Anything that goes beyond the rights already given by the Constitution is believed to be appeasement.

5.2 “The Elites”

As Mudde (2007: 65) explains, in right-wing populist ideology <<The national elite is criticized in both nativist and populist terms, i.e. traitors to the nation and corruptors of the people>>. The BJP sets out its critique under both aspects.

In the manifestos, the elites under attack are mostly political, namely the Congress and the governments it led since independence. Similarly to “people-centrism”, initially “anti-elitism” was not a crucial feature of the BJP’s ideology. In the 1984 manifesto there is only a very short mention about <<an unholy nexus [which] has developed between the corrupt politician, the corrupt bureaucrat and the corrupt businessman>> (BJP, 1984: 399). The concept is slightly more developed in the manifesto of 1989, which for the first time openly criticizes the government for bringing public morality to a deterioration, for its lack of commitment towards the nation and for the erosion of democratic institutions. To this <<dynastic rule mainly responsible for the country’s ruination>>, the BJP opposes itself for its <<impeccable record of clean public life and selfless service to the nation>> (BJP, 1989: 392). In the following years, the critique against the Congress and the previous governments expands to include accusations of dishonesty, nepotism, and failure in mobilizing people’s participation. The
Congress becomes portrayed as an “anti-people” party which has taken away power from the citizens, and is detached from the real needs of the common man. Between 2009 and 2014, anti-elitist feelings reach their peak, with the BJP condemning the Congress for its lack of accountability and responsibility, for being <<insensitive and indifferent to the plight of people>> (BJP, 2014: 4), and for being affected by Western models of institutions and administration, instead of adopting structures drawn from a real understanding of the Indian nation.

In the interviews, the elites mentioned cover a wider range of actors. Similarly to what is found in the party literature, the first elites to be criticized are political, namely the Congress Party, which is portrayed as dominated by the Nehru/Gandhi family,10 and culpable of having concentrated all the power in a few hands. Charu Pragya, from the BJP Youth Wing of Delhi, reports the example of the last two Congress-led UPA governments, when Manmohan Singh was Prime Minister: <<The power did not lie in the chair, and the Prime Minister was following the orders of Sonia Gandhi;11 and when the chair is not responsible and does not think about the people first, the country gets ruined>>. In line with the populist ideology, this party is pictured as being characterized by extreme corruption and nepotism, often involved in scandals and scams: Kumaramangalam describes it as a political organization where <<it is very easy to make money>>; Sudesh Verma, BJP National Spokesperson, as a party <<whose only ideology is the ideology of being in power>>. According to respondents, the Congress has always been too attached to the British-created establishment and aligned with Western interests, while neglecting the real needs of Indian people and being unaccountable to the masses.

In addition to this, Shakti Sinha, former Joint Secretary when Vajpayee was PM, and Kumaramangalam add that more generally, under the category “elites”, can be included all those people belonging to upper classes who are highly educated, profess the values of cosmopolitanism and liberalism, and are close to the West. Another aspect that some interviewees outline is that these socio-political elites are often located in Delhi: Ketkar talks about a sort of “Delhi centrism”, which does not care about those living in the outskirts of the country. Delhi elites are not only political, but also intellectual: all interviewees agree that the academia is highly dominated by the Left. Ganguly explains: <<Left/Communist intellectuals have always been anti-tradition, and they encourage a disruption of the traditional way of living. […] For the last 40 years, the Congress has allowed the Left to dominate the academic space: only if you profess the Communist ideology you are given a position or you can publish>>. Similarly, the (English-speaking) press is widely seen as being not objective, always criticizing the BJP and pushing for hate narrative. Other elites mentioned sporadically are foreign NGOs pursuing activities against national interests, and corporate elites within the bank system. This is in line with Mudde’s

10 The Nehru/Gandhi family is a pre-eminent family within the Indian domestic political scene, traditionally linked to the Congress. This family saw three of its members - Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi - becoming Prime Ministers of India.
11 Current party’s President.
findings (2007) about PRRPs often blaming the elites for being left-wing and progressive, and considering the media to be instrumentalized by established parties.

5.3 “The Others”
In the party literature, the concept of “the others” has developed slightly throughout the two examined decades. A category which is mentioned regularly since the first manifesto is that of illegal immigrants in the North East, mainly from Bangladesh. These “infiltrators” are a threat to the integrity of the nation for a number of reasons: because their <<demographic invasion>> (BJP, 1996: 279) has resulted in a considerable rise in the population of the North East, impacting ethnic identities of local populations and bringing serious socio-economic imbalances in a region already characterized by a lack of development; for fostering anti-national and separatist sentiments; and for providing logistic support to terrorist activities. Some of the solutions proposed by the BJP to face this issue include deportations, the maintenance of a national register of citizens and securing the borders. Other areas of concerns are J&K, where Kashmiri separatist groups threaten India’s integrity and the notion of “One Nation, One People”, and states such as Punjab, Gujarat or Rajasthan, all sharing their borders with Pakistan hence all vulnerable to infiltration of Pakistani terrorists. This identification of “the others” fits perfectly with that conceptualized by PRRPs, for which immigrants are the archetypical type of a nation’s enemy. In addition to them, ethnic minorities are also usually targeted by these parties, especially if their ethnicity is linked to that of bordering countries where they represent the majority (Mudde, 2007). This is exactly the case of the Muslim community in India, and the reason why in the party manifestos the BJP is so suspicious towards both Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In 1991, for the first time, Left extremists (also called Maoists or Naxalites) also find their place among the threats to the nation, due to the violent insurgency they carried out in Andhra Pradesh. They are mentioned again in the manifestos of 2004 and 2009, after their influence allegedly extended to 13 states. In 1989, foreign missionaries are also included in such category, for reportedly conducting forced Christian conversions among the Hindu population. In the following years, this will translate into provisions to monitor or even ban foreign funds to organizations operating in India to avoid <<fraudulent conversions>> (BJP, 1996: 302).

The interviewees’ replies are in line with the findings from the manifestos, even though they put more emphasis on the dangers of separatism. All interviewees answered that any person or group expressing views against the integrity of the nation, supporting divisive forces and seeking fragmentation, are the worst threat to the country. Under this definition we can find Kashmiri separatists in J&K and Left extremist forces, since they <<do not consider India as a nation>> but see it more as <<an occupational entity>>, as Ketkar and Ganguly explain. Several respondents highlight that both groups address

12 State in South India; currently Telangana.
students in universities and mobilize their opinion against the Indian nation, with the Congress often siding with them. To these categories, Ganguly adds "a section of the vocal urban elite which supports separatism and Naxalism and is very well connected to Western media and multilateral agencies, as well as university professors who give an ideological justification to separatism and terrorism". Most interviewees regard these actors not only as security threats, but also as ideological.

The second recurring "others" mentioned are Muslims, for two main reasons: terrorism and immigration. According to the BJP Islamic fundamentalism represents a terrible threat to the country, and the party’s officials express their concern about India being surrounded by hostile neighbors driven by religious extremism. This worry is connected to the issue of "illegal infiltrators", namely Muslim immigrants coming from countries seen as not politically stable, like Bangladesh or Myanmar. In this respect, one of the most significant bills the BJP tried to push during its mandate is the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, which aims at guaranteeing Indian citizenship to six (non-Muslim) religious minorities persecuted in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. The reason is that, according to the BJP, Muslims cannot be persecuted in Muslim-majority countries - even if this has resulted to be false, see for instance Shia or Ahmediya minorities in Pakistan. Moreover, this is also reflected by the stance the Indian government adopted towards Rohingya refugees, who have been deported to Myanmar in two rounds: October 2018 and January 2019. Again, many respondents point the finger at the Congress for the current situation of Muslims in India: "they [Muslims] find it difficult to assimilate in the society, since they have been told over and over again that their votes are important, and as a result they have become more arrogant. The basic Muslim in India today wants to dominate the country, has become more aggressive", says Kumaramangalam.

5.4 Authoritarianism

From the provisions it sets out in the field of law and order, the BJP could hardly be defined as an authoritarian party. Surely, it aims at rendering the security apparatus more efficient, but never exceeding the thresholds imposed by a democratic regime. The same can be said for its position on a major decentralization of power in favor of state governments and local authorities. Similarly, the party gives substantial attention to the guarantee of civil freedoms: for instance, it intends to make Freedom of the Press an explicit fundamental right, distinct from the more general Freedom of Expression. However, at the end of the 90s, in the field of internal security, the manifestos witness the introduction of some measures which could be perceived as leaning towards some sort of authoritarianism, even though they are justified in name of the fight against terrorism: these include giving to security forces "free hand to deal with terrorism" and legislating "tough deterrent laws against terrorist and disruptive activities" (BJP, 1996: 274-275). The meaning of “free hand” and “tough deterrent laws” is not specified further, which raises doubts about the extent to which such provisions could be implemented without eroding citizens’ basic civil rights. For instance, the BJP regrets the repeal of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act of 1985 (TADA), which had been widely criticized
by human rights advocates because some of its provisions were against international law, and consistent evidence suggests it was abused by the police as a tool of preventive detention (Khalan et al, 2006).

As expected, during the interviews this was the most difficult question to address. It is hard to imagine any politician who would admit that his/her party is authoritarian, which is why I tried to use some proxy questions related to whether basic freedoms are guaranteed and safeguarded by the party. Particularly for what concerns freedom of expression, all respondents agree that India is extremely tolerant when it comes to criticizing the government, especially since the BJP is allegedly attacked by the media all the time. However, they also affirm that any discourse or stance which is anti-national, meaning that it advocates for India’s dissolution or fragmentation, is subversive and therefore not allowed. Pragya reports as an example the slogans which were launched at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2016 (<<India will break up into two pieces>>, referring to the situation in J&K; Ganguly also affirms that <<When you support and justify terrorism as an act of freedom, when you stand publicly saying that India shall be fragmented, there should be no tolerance and no freedom of expression>>. Therefore, it seems that when the integrity of the nation is put under discussion, dissent is not allowed, and even fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression can be curtailed in the name of national interest.

5.5 Egalitarianism

Mudde (2007) shows that socio-economic issues are secondary to PRRPs, and mostly derive from the basic tenets of their ideology (populism, nativism, authoritarianism); on the contrary, March (2011) explains that in their political agenda PRLPs emphasize collective economic and social rights, and advocate for a major redistribution of resources from the elites. For the importance it gives to its socio-economic agenda and its emphasis on equality and sustainable growth, the second perspective is much closer to that adopted by the BJP, even though its economic thinking has increasingly pointed towards neoliberalism, especially during the 2000s.

In fact, rejecting both capitalism and communism, originally the party sought to pursue a so-called humane economy, whose basic tenet is that once development is guaranteed to the most unprivileged sections of the population, economic growth for all will consequently follow. Adopting a strong nationalistic economic approach, the BJP was highly critical of foreign “big businesses” which plundered the country after independence. However, already in 1991 a change in this trend can be witnessed, with a more open stance towards foreign capitals. In 1996, the party recognizes market economy as the fundamental paradigm in the post-Cold War context, while remaining aware that the state still matters since the market by itself cannot guarantee equal redistribution and social justice, and that modernization of India must not translate into <<a pale copy of the Western economic models>> (BJP, 1996: 265). Foreign investments become welcomed in sectors like infrastructure, high technology, research and development, but economic policies must always keep in mind the preservation of Indian economic interests. In 2004, globalization finally starts to be seen as an opportunity for India to become
a great power: "A big shift is taking place in the global economy [...] which favors low-cost economies over high-cost economies in manufacturing and services" (BJP, 2004: 16).

In this case, the interviews mainly reflect what is found in the manifestos. Outright equality represents a pillar of the BJP's ideology. All respondents assert that welfare and development must be guaranteed to all, and resources distributed first among the lowest sections of the population and then to all Indian people. "The duty of every government is to identify those who are at the end of the social ladder, and create policies to empower them," explains Ganguly. In terms of economic policies, as Shakti Sinha and Apurv Mishra, Senior Fellow at India Foundation, point out, the BJP was originally the party of small traders and small-scale industries, which sought the protection of the government from big corporations, and was against foreign investments and globalization. With the widening of its electoral outreach and the necessities imposed by the international economic system, the party gradually shifted its focus from the grassroots and state-owned economy to a more neoliberal view. In general, most respondents would define the actual economic thinking of the BJP as neoliberal; however, few members disagree with this view: Gopal Agarwal, BJP National Spokesperson for economic matters, explains that surely the party recognizes the role of market economy, but the government remains important in guaranteeing an equitable distribution of resources. With regards to globalization, all interviewees agree that even though at the beginning the BJP was against it, nowadays the party welcomes it since it recognizes the benefits that opening up has brought to the country’s economy. Nevertheless, globalization is not unconditionally accepted: in fact, the party still pursues what the respondents define as an “India First approach”, meaning that economic policies prioritize products which are produced in India.

5.6 Internationalism

Gleumes and Moreau (1999) identify five principal forms of internationalism among contemporary left-wing parties: 1) party-to-party bilateralism; 2) party-to-regime bilateralism; 3) party-to-party multilateralism; 4) party participation in “front” and ancillary organizations (trade unions, peace groups...); 5) party participation in social movements, especially in what March (2011) defines as global justice movement. Apart from the last one, none of them is explicitly quoted in the manifestos. The global justice movement represents "an opposition to neoliberalism and aspiration for alternative forms of globalization. [...] [Its] aim is a world united on principles of inclusion and social justice." (March: 2011: 535). The manifestos clearly outline these principles, that are so crucial to India being a former leader of the non-aligned movement and a major actor in the South-South cooperation dialogue, and are linked to its aversion towards the domination of superpowers’ interests and neo-colonialism in all its forms. More generally, the values behind the BJP’s foreign policy, such as peace, cooperation and

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13 RSS-affiliated policy think tank.
commitment to multilateralism, reflect that dedication to international solidarity which is typical of the left (March, 2011: 464).

An ideological feature which is worth mentioning because it has not been much explored by the literature yet, while being very salient to the BJP, is its relationship with the diaspora. In 1996, for the first time, the BJP highlights the importance of the Indian diaspora, considered as an <<asset to the country>> (BJP, 1996: 273) in terms of the investments it can direct towards the motherland. The 1998 manifesto explains that until now non-resident Indian citizens have been disregarded by previous governments, while the BJP intends to strengthen the links <<between Mother India and her children abroad>> (BJP, 1998: 209). Overseas Indians are expected not only to invest in the country, but also to <<lobby India’s case with the Governments and business establishments of their host country as well as in international fora>> (BJP, 1998: 209): in other words, they are considered as actors able to influence the domestic politics of the countries where they have settled down. Moreover, they are often encouraged to promote their Indian national identity in the foreign land.

When asked whether the BJP pursues the kind of cross-national connections mentioned above, all respondents agree that the party is deeply concerned with building contacts outside India; however, they do not refer to party-to-party links, which, as Ketkar affirms, <<are there, but more at a formal level>>: all 13 interviewees highlight the fundamental role of the Indian diaspora, which accounts for around 30 million people. As Vijay Chauthaiwale, Head of BJP Foreign Affairs Department, illustrates, since independence all governments have tried to build some connections with the Indian diaspora, but any attempt was mostly ceremonial; on the contrary, <<PM Modi has taken the engagement with the diaspora to the next level>>. Most interviewees mention the “Overseas Friends of the BJP”, a platform located in 25 foreign countries through which the BJP spreads the message of PM Modi’s good governance. According to them, in this way individuals living outside the country still feel involved in what happens in their motherland, and their sense of belonging and cultural identity is reinforced. The reasons behind the particular attention given by the BJP towards this group are many. Firstly, they are thought to act as <<good ambassadors of the country>>, by taking care of perception-management and strengthening a positive image of India outside; secondly, they are expected to bring back investments to India, and are involved in many philanthropic activities in their motherland. Chauthaiwale explains that their contribution in terms of both soft and financial power is enormous.

Consequently, even though it appears clear that the BJP is involved in cross-national networking to a great extent, this is not the kind of “internationalism” that is usually pursued by Left-wing parties; rather, it represents a powerful tool to push its nationalist agenda even further, so that, as Swapan Dasgupta, member of the Upper House of the Parliament, affirms, Indian citizens living outside <<can link themselves to the BJP as a form of Hindu identification>>.

Table 4.1: Comparison between the main findings from the manifestos and the interviews.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election manifestos</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Left/Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The people”</td>
<td>All Indian people, especially the most unprivileged sections of the population (SCs/STs, OBCs, minorities…) / Hindu</td>
<td>Left/Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The elites”</td>
<td>Congress Party and governments it led</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The others”</td>
<td>Illegal immigrants, separatists, Left extremists</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarianism</td>
<td>Special law &amp; order provisions to fight against terrorism</td>
<td>Right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarianism</td>
<td>Relevance of socio-economic agenda to guarantee development to all</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internationalism</td>
<td>Global justice movement, Indian diaspora</td>
<td>Left/Right?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A SOUTHERN POPULISM?

Even though it has been largely ignored by the literature on populism, the BJP can undoubtedly be regarded as a right-wing populist party. Firstly, it is populist because people-centrism and anti-elitism are crucial principles in its ideology, especially since it came to power in 2014; secondly, it is right-wing because the way it conceptualizes “the people”, “the elites” and “the others” is clearly nativist, and it can be seen as authoritarian in the sense that, according to its exponents, basic freedoms can be curtailed to individuals expressing views considered as “anti-national”. Nevertheless, it presents some features which are commonly attributed to the left: egalitarianism, understood as the emphasis on a major redistribution of resources and the relevance of its socio-economic agenda, and its international dimension, namely the values behind its foreign policy and its commitment to the global justice movement.

Since virtually all the research on right-wing and left-wing populism has been drawn upon examples coming from US, Europe and South America, it would be interesting to explore whether other Asian populist parties present these mixed features, and to assess whether new ideological categorizations are needed if more of these cases emerge. I suggest that the fact that India was a former colony belonging to the Global South, like all South American countries, makes it hard for any Indian party not to promote
values such as equality, social justice and international cooperation in its ideology. Moreover, India is on its way to become a global power, which means that it is deeply aware of the importance of regional integration and multilateralism in the current international order: examples of this behavior can be found in its push for major cooperation in fora like BIMSTEC or BRICS, and its hunger to get a seat at the UN Security Council. Clearly, this hypothesis could also be tested by researching on African countries.

It is possible that nowadays a *southern* populism is emerging in the Global South, which combines the tendency towards nativism witnessed lately in many - if not all - regions of the world, while remaining rooted to some extent in these countries’ post-colonial ideologies. Similar ideas have started to appear extremely recently in the literature, for instance in the works of Miller-Idriss (2019) or Destradi and Plagemann (2019).

In addition to this, academics have not addressed extensively enough the question of cross-national connection of PRRPs to citizens living outside the country. Mudde (2007: 73) argues that <<Most of the times, these groups or individuals are accused of the same vices as the native elites within the country, i.e. corruption, leftism and treason>>. This is clearly not the case of the BJP, that has been strengthening the links with the Indian diaspora more than any other party in India. This finding could potentially lead to a very innovative direction for the research on right-wing populism, in terms of both demand side and supply side. Why would PRRPs reach out to those nationals that have decided to leave the country? At the same time, if citizens living outside the country can be thought as supporting globalization and values such as cosmopolitanism, how can this attitude translate into voting for a nativist party, as it is the case for many non-resident Indians backing up the BJP? Again, it might be that socio-economic and behavioral patterns in European emigration differ from those found in the Global South, which would explain different types of engagement by populist parties towards these communities.

All these discrepancies point to one fundamental recommendation: the literature on populism needs more cross-regional comparative research. This paper demonstrates that the BJP can be regarded as a remarkable example of populist party, but it still maintains crucial differences from its Western and South American counterparts, integrating elements from both. While the scholarship has extensively addressed the topic in some regions of the world, for others it remains inadequate, and as a result cross-regional comparative research is highly underdeveloped. Parties such as the BJP cannot be neglected anymore, especially in this peculiar moment of international relations, when soon many states within the Indo-Pacific region are expected to become global powers. More attention towards these countries, and towards India being a consolidated democracy, would provide the literature with innovative insights about what can arguably be considered as the most salient political phenomenon of our days.

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14 In fact, when looking at the manifestos of the other relevant national party, the Congress, these elements are also present; nevertheless, right-wing principles such as critiques against “Westernized” elites, concerns about immigration and ambiguous anti-terrorism measures remain peculiar of the BJP.
15 Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.
16 Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa association.
7. REFERENCES


**ANNEX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Date and location of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rohit Kumar</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Junior Fellow at India Foundation and personal assistant of BJP National Secretary Ram Madhav</td>
<td>13/11/18, L’Opera Bikaner House, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Shakti Sinha</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Former Joint Secretary under Vajpayee’s government and Director of the Nehru Memorial Museum &amp; Library</td>
<td>15/11/18, Nehru Memorial Museum &amp; Library, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Apurv Mishra</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Senior Fellow at India Foundation</td>
<td>08/12/18, Vault Café, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Prafulla Ketkar</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chief Editor of Organiser</td>
<td>08/01/18 and 23/01/19, Organiser, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Charu Pragya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Media panelist of BJP Delhi Youth Wing and National In-charge of BJP Youth Wing</td>
<td>15/01/19, Teen Murti Marg, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Swapan Dasgupta</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Member of the Upper House of the Parliament</td>
<td>20/01/19, Teen Murti Marg, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lalitha Kumaramangalam</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>BJP former National Secretary</td>
<td>21/01/19, India Foundation, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Amibath Sinha</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Member of BJP National Executive Committee and Supreme Court lawyer</td>
<td>23/01/19, Janpath, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Anirban Ganguly</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Member of BJP Policy Research Department and National Co-Convener of BJP Library and Documentation Department</td>
<td>24/01/19, SPMRF, New Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Sudesh Verma</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>BJP National Spokesperson</td>
<td>30/01/19, Hotel Lalit, New Delhi</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Vijay Chauthaiwale</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Head of BJP Foreign Affairs Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Harsh Vardan Singh</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>General Secretary of BJP Uttar Pradesh Youth Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Gopal Agarwal</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>BJP National Spokesperson</td>
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