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Hindutva and the Changing Nature of Indian Democracy: Religious Populism under Narendra Modi

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Abstract

Scholarship on populism remains centred on Europe and the Americas, although India, the world's most populous democracy, offers a significant case. Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi has combined Hindutva, the ideology of Hindu nationalism, with populist appeals to the will of the people. This article argues that Hindutva has become a populist project that constructs the Hindu majority as the authentic nation and casts religious minorities and opponents as threats. Using a qualitative single-case design based on scholarship, legislation, manifestos, speeches, and monitoring reports, it examines the discursive construction of a Hindu "people"; its institutionalisation through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the National Register of Citizens, and the abrogation of Article 370; the consequences for minorities and democratic accountability; and its projection into foreign policy. Elections continue to function, but minorities are increasingly disadvantaged, and media freedom and executive checks have weakened. In foreign policy, populist rhetoric has largely been tempered by strategic pragmatism, with Pakistan the main exception. The article contributes to comparative debates on religious populism beyond the West.

Keywords: Populism, Hindutva, Religious Populism, Identity Politics, India, Modi

Introduction

Populism has been examined largely from Eurocentric perspectives, concentrating on Western Europe, the Americas, and leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). South Asia has received less attention, although a growing body of work examines India (Chacko, 2018; Destradi, 2026; Plagemann & Destradi, 2019; Wojczewski, 2020). As a "thin-centred" phenomenon, populism readily blends with religious and cultural sentiments, shaping both domestic governance and international behaviour.

India has been governed since 2014 by the BJP under Narendra Modi, a party rooted in Hindutva. Scholars describe the resulting changes differently: Jaffrelot (2021) speaks of an ethnic democracy, Varshney (2019) of electoral vibrancy alongside mounting liberal deficits, and Tudor (2023) of an erosion of civil liberties pushing India towards a hybrid regime. Rather than advancing a normative judgment, this study analyses the mechanisms through which Hindu nationalist populism has reshaped democratic practice in an established democracy where elections remain competitive.

Existing studies examine the domestic and external dimensions separately. Chacko (2018) and Jaffrelot (2021, 2024) analyse the fusion of Hindu nationalism, populism, and state power, while Plagemann and Destradi (2019), Wojczewski (2020), and Destradi (2026) analyse populism in India's foreign policy. What remains unexplained is whether the construction of a Hindu "people" that legitimises majoritarian policy at home also shapes external conduct, and why its influence varies across issues. This article applies one integrated framework to both domains.

The question carries particular weight because the Constitution commits the state to secularism, made explicit in its Preamble in 1976, and guarantees equality and religious freedom in a society in which Muslims constitute about 14 per cent of the population, alongside substantial Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, and Jain communities (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2015). Populism that grounds legitimacy in electoral majorities therefore creates a specific tension between electoral legitimacy and the equal citizenship of minorities. The period 2014–2025 spans two BJP single-party majorities and a third, coalition-dependent term from 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2024), allowing majoritarian populism to be observed both at its height and under coalition constraints.

The study asks four questions. RQ1: How does Modi's discourse construct Hindu identity as the foundation of national belonging? RQ2: Through which institutional and legislative mechanisms is Hindutva-based populism translated into governance? RQ3: What are the consequences for religious minorities and democratic accountability? RQ4: How does religious populism influence India's foreign-policy rhetoric and conduct?

The article makes three contributions. First, it integrates Mudde, Laclau, and Mouffe into one framework that explains how a single antagonistic construction of "the people" is converted into citizenship law, institutional practice, and selective foreign-policy mobilisation. Existing accounts of Hindu majoritarianism explain why majoritarian appeals succeed electorally; this framework also explains how they are carried into governance. Second, it shows how identity-based populism can weaken liberal democratic norms without abandoning elections. Third, it identifies when populist ideology carries into external conduct: where an issue is tied to domestic identity narratives.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Populism

Although contested, populism is widely understood through people-centrism and a Manichean view of society. Mudde (2004) defines it as an ideology dividing society into "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" and holding that politics should express the general will (p. 543); its opposites are elitism and pluralism. Müller (2016) adds that populists are anti-

pluralist, claiming that they alone represent the authentic people. These accounts draw mainly on Western democracies (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Laclau (2005) treats populism as a political logic: unmet demands are linked in a "chain of equivalence," and an antagonistic frontier is drawn between "the people" and a hostile other, with nationalist, economic, or cultural elements emphasised according to context. This contextual flexibility distinguishes Laclau's account from Mudde's ideational definition. Taggart (2019) argues that populism operates within democratic politics and is reformist rather than revolutionary, shading into authoritarianism beyond its bounds; it enters politics "in a way that is at odds with that politics" (p. 81).

Identity Politics and Populism

Identity politics mobilises distinctions such as ethnicity, religion, or class for political ends. Mouffe (1992, 2000) argues that collective identities are constituted through an "us versus them" distinction, so that a "fully inclusive political community can never be realized" (Mouffe, 1992, p. 30). Where open contestation between democratic positions is absent, confrontation shifts to religious or ethnic identification (Mouffe, 2000). Although developed for Western democracies, her framework clarifies how identity politics can align with populist rhetoric and reproduce a binary view of society.

Narendra Modi's Populism and Hindutva

Jaffrelot (2024) argues that Modi's rise in 2014 combined a plebeian image, as a leader from an Other Backward Class background, with the conservative ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), in which he was trained. Contrasting himself with the dynastic Nehru-Gandhi family, Modi presented himself as both a common man and an exceptional figure, using the rhetoric of victimhood, while religious polarisation submerged caste divisions among Hindus. Although the BJP's 2014 platform promised social justice for the "deprived sections of society," upper-caste dominance persisted among its representatives, and lower castes were included in a calculated and limited manner (Jaffrelot, 2024). Jaffrelot (2021) characterises the resulting order as an ethnic democracy, and Chatterji et al. (2019) document the emergence of a majoritarian state.

Babar (2023) argues that Modi's rhetoric and policies, such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, place Hindus at the centre of national identity; Hindutva reduces the plurality of Hinduism to a single political identity, casts non-Hindus as outsiders through the idea of Akhand Bharat (undivided India), and, through Sangh Parivar campaigns such as Ghar Wapsi (homecoming), pursues religious purification. Chacko (2018) links Hindu nationalism with neoliberal development in an authoritarian populism, while Sinha (2017) shows how social media helped Modi build a personalised, if fragile, hegemony.

Religious Leadership, Minority Exclusion, and Digital Mobilisation

Vasudeva (2025) argues that Modi's image has been sacralised: through "populist darshan," media-amplified visual and rhetorical strategies create a sense of direct contact between a quasi-divine leader and followers. Sinha (2021) shows how strong leadership converts a divide between "the people" and their enemies into electoral mandates for a majoritarian nation and neoliberal reform. Roy (2024) argues that India is becoming an ethnocracy in which the majority uses state power to define territory and society ethnically, while documenting resistance through courts, opposition parties, and protests. Allie (2026) shows that minority electoral gains without safeguards can consolidate the majority, so representation does not guarantee inclusion. Oza et al. (2024) show how WhatsApp circulates Hindu nationalist content and marginalises minorities, a condition they term "digital denizenship," and Mathur (2023) explains how secular voters reinterpret secularism to reduce the dissonance of supporting Modi.

Hindu Nationalism and Foreign Policy

Research on Indian foreign policy distinguishes the domestic mobilisation of

foreign-policy narratives from decision-making itself. Comparing Erdoğan and Modi, Destradi et al. (2022) find that Modi, whose populism emphasises people-centrism more than anti-elitism, politicises foreign policy only marginally, chiefly by highlighting India's greatness. Huju (2022) shows Hindu nationalism reshaping the Indian Foreign Service, slowed by an established diplomatic elite, while Chatterjee and Das (2023) and Srivastava (2023) trace India's shift to a Hindutva-inflected civilisational self-presentation. These studies suggest that populism's foreign-policy effects should be sought first in rhetoric, institutions, and self-presentation, then in outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

The study combines Mudde's ideational, Laclau's discursive, and Mouffe's identity-based approaches. Mudde's (2004) thin-centred populism explains how populism attaches to host ideologies; in what some call "Moditva," claims to speak for the people fuse with Hindutva (Jaffrelot, 2021). Laclau's (2005) antagonistic frontier explains how Modi's rhetoric casts the Hindu majority as wronged by secular elites and foreign invaders, framing politics as a contest between the nation and "anti-national" forces (Wojczewski, 2020). Anderson's (1983) imagined communities explain how this discourse redefines belonging, so that the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the abrogation of Article 370, and the Ram Temple become expressions of a Hindu nation. The realist expectation that foreign policy follows interest, power, and security provides a benchmark for assessing populism abroad (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017).

Recent work refines these categories: Vasudeva's (2025) sacralised leadership extends people-centrism; Roy's (2024) ethnocracy specifies the institutional end point of Laclau's frontier; and Destradi et al.'s (2022) distinction between politicisation and decision-making grounds this study's separation of foreign-policy rhetoric from conduct. Together, these perspectives allow populism to be analysed not merely as an electoral strategy but as a governing logic reshaping institutions, citizenship, and state–society relations.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative single-case design. India under Modi (2014–2025) is a crucial case: a major non-Western democracy in which a religious-populist party has led three governments, winning majorities in 2014 (282 seats) and 2019 (303 seats) and, in 2024, 240 of 543 seats before forming a coalition National Democratic Alliance government (Election Commission of India, 2014, 2019, 2024). If religious populism reshapes democracy where elections remain competitive, and the constitution is secular, the effect should be visible here. The period of analysis ends in December 2025, including the 2024 election and the May 2025 India–Pakistan conflict. Sources published in early 2026 are used only where they assess events within this period; RSF's 2026 Index, for example, reflects conditions during 2025.

The analysis uses secondary data: peer-reviewed scholarship; official documents, including legislation, BJP manifestos, and Press Information Bureau records of speeches; reports by Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED); and media reporting, used only for chronology. Sources were selected for relevance to the research questions, publication between 2014 and 2026 (except foundational theory), origin in peer-reviewed, governmental, or established monitoring outlets, and public availability. The cited corpus comprises 35 scholarly works, one policy report, 19 official documents and datasets, four Supreme Court judgments and orders, and three monitoring sources.

The theories were translated into five analytical codes (Table 1), and coded material was assessed against four indicators: minority inclusion, media freedom, executive accountability, and diplomatic pragmatism.

Table 1

Coding framework

Analytical code	Theoretical source	Indicators	Main sources

Religious identity	Mudde (2004); Anderson (1983)	Hindu culture and civilisational revival as the basis of nationhood	PIB speeches; BJP manifestos
Popular sovereignty	Mudde (2004)	Claims to embody the people's will; appeals to the mandate	Speeches; manifestos
Minority exclusion	Laclau (2005); Mouffe (2000)	Religious criteria in citizenship; critics as "anti-national"; communal violence	CAA; NRC; ACLED; HRW
Institutional centralisation	Müller (2016)	Ordinances; bypassed committees; UAPA and sedition cases; media pressure	Legislation; HRW; RSF
Foreign-policy mobilisation	Verbeek & Zaslove (2017); Plagemann & Destradi (2019)	Crises framed as strength; personalised summitry; rhetoric–conduct gap	PIB; Hall (2019); Destradi (2026)

Note. PIB = Press Information Bureau; CAA = Citizenship (Amendment) Act; NRC = National Register of Citizens; HRW = Human Rights Watch; RSF = Reporters Without Borders; UAPA = Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

Minority inclusion is assessed through citizenship legislation, the NRC, and ACLED data; media freedom through RSF's World Press Freedom Index and actions against journalists; executive accountability through legislative procedure and the use of anti-terror and sedition laws; and diplomatic pragmatism by comparing rhetoric with decisions on partnerships, summits, and military responses. The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, documents were arranged into a chronological record of discourse and policy. Second, each item was coded using the categories in Table 1. Third, the coded material was related to the indicators, so that each policy measure was linked both to its discursive justification and to its documented effects. Fourth, the interpretation was tested against competing explanations and recent empirical studies of voter behaviour, digital mobilisation, and minority representation (Allie, 2026; Mathur, 2023; Oza et al., 2024), which serve as external checks on claims that documents alone cannot establish. Each major claim was triangulated across at least two source types, with speeches read against the policies that followed them. Numerical data are used descriptively, with their source and period. To limit bias, countervailing evidence was included: the BJP's loss of its majority in 2024, the appeal of welfare delivery, cooperative diplomacy, the 2021 repeal of the farm laws, and the 2022 suspension of sedition provisions. The study uses only public documents and involves no human participants, so formal ethical approval was not required; its findings remain interpretive and depend on the reliability of existing documentation.

Results and Discussion

The findings address domestic politics first and foreign policy second, weighing electoral, security, institutional, and economic explanations against the populist interpretation.

Modi's Rise to Power

Before 2014, corruption scandals over 2G spectrum and coal block allocations, together with slowing growth and high inflation, eroded trust in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, creating an opening that the BJP, supported by the RSS, used under Modi's leadership. In Mudde's (2004) terms, the conditions for populism were present: political resentment, a perceived threat to the people's way of life, and an attractive leader. As Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi had cultivated a development image but faced criticism over the 2002 riots, although a Special Investigation Team found no prosecutable evidence against him, upheld by the Supreme Court in 2022 (Supreme Court of India, 2022b). He turned this criticism into a resource, presenting himself as a public servant targeted by a secular and media elite.

His campaigns emphasised Hindu pride and the betrayal of ordinary citizens by secular elites; in his 2019 Independence Day address, he presented his government as taking decisions long postponed (Press Information Bureau, 2019). His image as a tea-seller's son who had risen above dynastic privilege made him one of

the people (Jaffrelot, 2021). In 2014, the BJP won the first single-party majority in three decades (Election Commission of India, 2014), through a personalised campaign, Abki Baar, Modi Sarkar (this time, a Modi government), and digital outreach that bypassed traditional media (Sinha, 2017). In Laclau's (2005) terms, grievances over corruption, unemployment, and cultural resentment were linked in a chain of equivalence centred on the leader. These appeals correspond to the codes of popular sovereignty and religious identity. Yet welfare measures such as direct benefit transfers also broadened support among poorer voters, indicating that electoral incentives, not ideology alone, explain its durability. Voter research supports this reading: Mathur (2023) finds that secular supporters accommodate the communal consequences of their vote by redefining secularism.

Manifestos formalised this approach, from the 2014 emphasis on anti-corruption and national renewal (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2014) to the 2024 "GYAN" formula addressing the poor, youth, farmers, and women (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2024), while retaining the promise of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC). Supporters see democratic mandates and overdue reform, but this view overlooks the cumulative effects of majoritarian policymaking.

Institutionalising Majoritarianism

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) of December 2019 offered accelerated citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who entered before 2015, excluding Muslims, including persecuted Muslim sects (Government of India, 2019). Critics argue that it made religion a criterion for citizenship, in tension with constitutional secularism (Babar, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2025). On 5 August 2019, the government revoked Jammu and Kashmir's special status under Article 370, a long-standing Hindu nationalist demand later upheld by the Supreme Court (Supreme Court of India, 2023) that energised the BJP's base while deepening alienation among Kashmiri Muslims. In Ayodhya, a 2019 Supreme Court verdict awarded the site of the Babri Masjid, demolished in 1992, for a Ram Temple to be built by a government-established trust (Supreme Court of India, 2019), and the Prime Minister led its consecration in January 2024. Laying the foundation stone, Modi called the temple "a modern symbol of our culture, eternal faith, national spirit and collective willpower" (Press Information Bureau, 2020b), equating the nation's "people" with its Hindu majority and exemplifying the sacralised leadership identified by Vasudeva (2025).

These measures show minority exclusion moving from discourse into law: Laclau's (2005) antagonistic frontier is reproduced in a citizenship criterion based on religion. The government justified them on grounds of security, integration, and humanitarian protection, which may explain their timing and framing but not the exclusion of persecuted Muslims from the CAA. In Roy's (2024) terms, they mark a move towards ethnocracy, although the protests they provoked show that the project remains contested.

Assam's National Register of Citizens (NRC) excluded about 1.9 million residents from its final list in August 2019 (Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration, Assam, 2019). Combined with the CAA and calls for a nationwide NRC, it generated fears among Muslims of statelessness, while non-Muslims would be protected. The UCC came into force in Uttarakhand in January 2025 (Government of Uttarakhand, 2024); proponents see it as equality, while critics see it as a measure directed at Muslim personal law. ACLED (2024) recorded more than 210 Hindu–Muslim clashes from May 2019 to April 2024, over half involving violence against civilians, largely by Hindu mobs against Muslims, triggered by cow vigilantism, "love jihad" narratives, and religious processions.

The slogan Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas (together with all, development for all) contrasts with these outcomes, as do the costs that demonetisation in 2016 and the COVID-19 migrant worker crisis imposed on poorer citizens. This gap between inclusive rhetoric and selective

inclusion reflects a classic populist duality. By identifying Muslims, secularists, and liberals as threats to unity, the government legitimised exclusion in the language of unification (Chatterji et al., 2019; Varshney, 2019), and Allie (2026) shows that formal participation does not secure inclusion. Table 2 summarises these measures.

Table 2

Major policy measures and their implications for democratic governance, 2014–2025

Policy measure	Dates	Affected populations	Implications
Citizenship (Amendment) Act	Passed 2019; rules March 2024	Migrants from three neighbours; Muslims excluded	Religion as a citizenship criterion
Abrogation of Article 370	August 2019; upheld December 2023	Residents of Jammu and Kashmir	Special status and statehood removed; prolonged restrictions
NRC (Assam)	Final list August 2019	About 1.9 million excluded residents	Risk of statelessness; selective protection with the CAA
Ram Temple, Ayodhya	Verdict 2019; consecration January 2024	Indian Muslims	State participation in a religious project
Farm laws	Ordinances 2020; repealed November 2021	Farmers in Punjab and Haryana	Committee scrutiny bypassed; reversed by protest
UAPA and sedition cases	2019 onwards; sedition suspended 2022	Journalists, students, activists	Detention without trial; chilling effect on dissent
Uniform Civil Code (Uttarakhand)	In force January 2025	Communities under religious personal laws	Uniformity weighed against minority autonomy

Note. Compiled from Government of India (2019, 2020, 2021), Ministry of Home Affairs (2024), Government of Uttarakhand (2024), Office of the State Coordinator of National Registration, Assam (2019), Supreme Court of India (2019, 2022a, 2023), Human Rights Watch (2025), and ACLED (2024).

Media, Dissent, and Executive Centralisation

In RSF's World Press Freedom Index, India fell from 140th of 180 countries in 2014 to 161st in 2023 and, after rising to 151st in 2025, to 157th in the 2026 Index, covering 2025, with RSF citing violence against journalists, concentrated ownership, and partisan outlets (Reporters Without Borders, 2026). In February 2023, shortly after the BBC aired a documentary critical of Modi, links to which the government had ordered blocked, income tax authorities conducted a three-day "survey" of their Delhi and Mumbai offices. Journalists such as Prashant Kanojia and Siddique Kappan were arrested, the latter under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA); sedition laws were used against critics until the Supreme Court suspended them in 2022 (Supreme Court of India, 2022a; Tudor, 2023); and students who protested against the CAA were charged under the UAPA, which permits prolonged detention without trial (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Policymaking has also centralised. The 2020 farm laws were promulgated as ordinances and passed without committee scrutiny before being repealed in 2021 after a year of protests (Government of India, 2020, 2021). Such personalisation treats the leader as the embodiment of the popular will (Müller, 2016). The BJP's digital apparatus has targeted critics, while takedown requests have increased (Human Rights Watch, 2025), and WhatsApp networks further marginalise minorities (Oza et al., 2024). By labelling critics "anti-national," the government extended the populist binary, presenting dissenters as allies of a corrupt elite, which reflects Müller's (2016) anti-pluralist logic. Yet the repeal of the farm laws and the suspension of sedition provisions show that social and judicial checks still operate, if weakened.

Populism under Coalition Constraints

The 2024 result tested whether the project depends on single-party control. With 240 seats,

the BJP relies on the Telugu Desam Party (16 seats) and the Janata Dal (United) (12) (Election Commission of India, 2024). Procedure has partly recovered: the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, introduced in August 2024, was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee rather than passed without scrutiny, and the government withdrew a lateral-entry recruitment advertisement after objections from allies (Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, 2024). The direction, however, has persisted. Both allies voted for the Waqf (Amendment) Act in April 2025, which restructured the governance of Muslim endowments (Government of India, 2025), while the UCC has advanced only in BJP-governed states, with no national bill by December 2025. Coalition dependence has therefore moderated the pace and procedure of majoritarian policymaking more than its content, indicating that electoral incentives condition, but do not determine, the populist project.

Populism and Foreign Policy

Populism's influence on foreign policy is constrained by geopolitics, interdependence, and strategy. There is no distinct "populist foreign policy"; populism affects how policy is framed, made, and communicated (Destradi et al., 2021; Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). Plagemann and Destradi (2019) find that Modi changed foreign-policy processes and rhetoric more than substance, and Wojczewski (2020) shows that his discourse presents India as a civilisational power held back by a Westernised elite. Destradi (2026) adds that the effects vary by issue: where policy is tied to Hindu nationalist identity narratives, as with Pakistan, populism has encouraged escalation, whereas relations with China have been comparatively restrained. This is consistent with the finding that Modi politicises foreign policy mainly by emphasising India's greatness rather than by constructing foreign threats (Destradi et al., 2022).

Modi invokes civilisational pride, yet his government pursues pragmatic partnerships (Hall, 2016, 2019). Despite the economic nationalism of Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India), India has deepened ties with the United States, the Gulf states, Japan, and Southeast Asia, engaged actively in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Japan, and Australia while remaining in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), chaired BRICS in 2021, and used its 2023 G20 presidency to present itself as a voice of the Global South, enhancing Modi's personal standing (Destradi, 2026). Hindutva is more visible in the Foreign Service (Huju, 2022) and civilisational self-presentation (Chatterjee & Das, 2023; Srivastava, 2023) than in the interests driving decisions.

The gap between rhetoric and conduct is clearest with China. After the June 2020 Galwan clash killed 20 Indian soldiers, rhetoric stayed restrained, and India responded with app bans (Press Information Bureau, 2020a), investment screening, and talks that produced a patrolling arrangement in October 2024 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). Here, power asymmetry, economic interdependence, and security considerations, rather than identity narratives, best explain policy, consistent with Hall and Ganguly's (2022) finding that structural constraints bound Modi's foreign-policy ambitions. Likewise, India's participation in BRICS, the SCO, the Quad, and the G20 continues a strategy of multi-alignment that predates Modi (Hall, 2016); populism has shaped the presentation of these engagements, notably through the personalised branding of the G20 presidency, more than their substance (Destradi, 2026; Hall & Ganguly, 2022).

Relations with Pakistan are the main area where nationalist and exclusionary politics shaped external behaviour. Modi's unscheduled visit to Lahore in December 2015 briefly raised hopes of a thaw, but after the 2016 attacks on the Pathankot air base and on an army base in Uri, which killed 19 soldiers, India conducted publicised "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control (LoC) and boycotted the SAARC summit in Islamabad. After the February 2019 Pulwama bombing, claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammad, which killed 40 paramilitary personnel, India launched

airstrikes on Balakot, claiming heavy militant casualties that Pakistan disputed; Pakistan downed an Indian aircraft and returned its pilot, and LoC exchanges continued until both sides recommitted to the ceasefire in February 2021. Then, after the April 2025 Pahalgam attack killed 26 people, India held the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025) and launched Operation Sindoor, followed by a brief conflict that ended on 10 May. Each response followed a militant attack, so security considerations clearly mattered; the populist framework explains their public framing and escalatory signalling, with retaliation presented as a strong leader protecting the nation (Destradi, 2026; Plagemann & Destradi, 2019). Taken together, these cases show that populism in foreign policy is often performative, reaffirming domestic support and a strong leadership persona; where geopolitical and economic constraints are strong, as with China and partnerships with the United States and the Gulf, rhetoric gives way to interest-based policy.

Conclusion

On RQ1, Modi's discourse constructs Hindu identity as the foundation of belonging by fusing a plebeian persona with narratives of Hindu revival and drawing a frontier against secular elites, "anti-national" critics, and, implicitly, Muslims. On RQ2, this discourse has been institutionalised through the CAA and NRC, the abrogation of Article 370, state involvement in the Ram Temple, and centralised lawmaking. On RQ3, minorities have been disadvantaged, and media freedom and executive accountability weakened, although elections remain competitive. On RQ4, religious populism has shaped foreign-policy rhetoric widely, but its influence on conduct is largely confined to Pakistan, where foreign policy intersects with domestic identity narratives.

The legislative changes, declining press freedom, use of anti-terror and sedition laws, and communal clashes are documented by official and independent sources. That these form a coherent majoritarian project, and that populism drives escalation with Pakistan, are interpretive claims the evidence supports but cannot prove; electoral, security, and economic factors offer partial alternatives. The repeal of the farm laws, the suspension of sedition provisions, and the BJP's 2024 loss of its majority show that constraints persist, although coalition dependence has slowed majoritarian policymaking more than it has redirected it.

Theoretically, combining Mudde, Laclau, and Mouffe identifies a single antagonistic construction of "the people" operating across elections, institutions, and foreign policy, and specifies when it carries abroad. Read alongside recent research on sacralised leadership, voter behaviour, digital mobilisation, and minority representation, the findings indicate that religious populism in India rests not only on top-down discourse but also on the everyday practices and voter reasoning that sustain it. The study thereby challenges Eurocentric accounts of populism by showing how religion, nationalism, and history combine in India to produce a populism that reconfigures not only electoral competition but the ethos of the state.

Recommendations

Future research should compare Hindu nationalist populism with religious populism in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, building on Pakistan's case on work on religious parties and political hate speech (Anam & Ahmed, 2024; Shah et al., 2021). Interviews with voters, party workers, and journalists would test these interpretive findings, and research should examine whether the procedural moderation observed after 2024 outlasts coalition dependence. For policymakers and civil society, independent courts, a free press, and minority protections remain essential safeguards for pluralist democracy.

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