Religious Populism, Memory, and Violence in India*

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Abstract

While the literature on right-wing populisms has focused on the phenomenon as an ideology, political style, and economic policy, populist interaction with religions, especially in non-Western cases, remains underexamined. Contributing to the study of religious populism, this article discusses the case of hindutva (Hindu nationalism) in India, concentrating on Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in power since 2014. From a social movements perspective, the analysis amalgamates three interrelated components: framing practices, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities. Regarding framing, the article deals with how the BJP redefines national identity and historical memory in exclusive association with Hinduism—at the expense of religious minorities. Concerning mobilizing structures, the BJP's grassroots network Sangh Parivar is examined as an extensive set of organizations promoting Hindu pre-eminence, as well as the personalized communication tools centred around Modi himself, fostering a quasi-sacralised image of the leader. Finally, post-1980 sectarian violence is recounted as a key political opportunity that facilitated the BJP's consolidation of power. Illustrating the aggressive articulation of Hinduism by the BJP via these three mechanisms, and incorporating an array of data such as the declarations of key figures in the movement, movement websites, newspaper articles, reports, as well as other historiographies and analyses, the article makes two theoretical propositions. First, it contends that a social movements outlook allows for a broader analysis of populism, one that takes into account grassroots forces and historical progression, which goes beyond understanding it merely as a rhetorical people-elite distinction. Second, it argues that religion warrants more attention in the literature as a cultural component of contemporary populisms. Shifting the focus to non-Western cases would help advance the study of the populism-religion nexus in its culturally and geographically variegated forms.

Introduction

In a grand inaugural event on October 31, 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the world's tallest statue on the banks of the Narmada River in Gujarat. Twice as tall as the Statue

of Liberty, the 182-meter-high "Statue of Unity" depicts Sardar Patel, the "Iron Man of India", a hard-liner nationalist and pro-Hindu politician during India's independence movement. The choice of Patel, instead of secularly oriented founding leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru, is part of a larger turn towards Hindu nationalism as a populist political project in India, championed by Modi's *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) government. Having already declared Patel's birthday National Unity Day a few years earlier, Modi announced the Sardar Patel Award

for National Integration, in December 2018, to be conferred annually to any citizen who contributed to national unity.

This article inquires into the articulation of Hinduism as part of a national-populist programme in India under Modi's BJP government, in power since 2014. Drawing on the social movements literature in political sociology, it examines the framing practices, mobilizing structures, and the political opportunities that have shaped *hindutva* (Hindu nationalism) as a populist phenomenon. With regard to framing, the article discusses how *hindutva* discursively redefines national identity and historical memory in exclusive reference to Hinduism. This rhetoric rests on a tripartite distinction typical of populism: "the people", "the elite", and "the others" (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016). The BJP equates "the people" to the Hindu majority (roughly 80%), delineates "the elite" as the secular politicians and intellectuals centred around the Indian National Congress (henceforth Congress)—the founding party that ruled during most of the post-independence period—, and characterizes "the others" predominantly as non-Hindus, especially the Muslim minority (14%). As part of its belligerent rhetoric, the BJP often singles out Muslims as a source of imminent threat to national security, deemed in collusion with Congress, and, externally, with Pakistan.

Turning to mobilizing structures, the article lays out the symbiotic relationship between the BJP government and a vast network of grassroots *hindutva* organizations. Headed by *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), the BJP's parent organization, this network makes up *Sangh Parivar*, a family of several dozen entities ranging from unions and occupational organizations to news and communication networks, religious associations, think tanks, educational bodies, economic groups, and social service providers. These organizations endorse the ideal of *Hindu Rashtra*, a state with Hindu characteristics, underpinning national-populist discourses and policymaking to favour the primacy of the Hindu majority. In addition to these networks, this section also touches

upon the highly effective (and affective) personalized mobilization tools created around Modi himself, promoting a quasi-sacralised image of the populist leader through a carefully orchestrated, technology-driven marketing campaign resting on Hindu symbolism.

Finally, the article recounts a key political opportunity that the BJP both benefited from and contributed to in the 1980s and after: increasing ethno-religious conflict and violence, especially between Hindus and Muslims. Episodes such as Sikh extremism and the Ayodhya disputes of the 1980s and the 1990s, the Gujarat Riots of 2002, and the Kashmir conflict with Pakistan helped solidify a militant support base for the Hindu cause. The BJP's populist policy framework to advance a communalist politics of fear through these items "allows political mobilization in the name of cultural defense, promotes a majoritarian nationalism in the name of challenging … secularism, justifies anti-minority violence … and legitimizes themselves perpetually in the name of defense of the Hindu nation" (Anand 2011: 151).

The article begins with a brief overview of the literature on populism, including its complex relationship with nationalism. Here, I follow Rogers Brubaker (2017, 2019) in defining the two phenomena as not entirely separate, but as inherently intertwined discourses that make up a "national-populist" moment in the singular. This section also examines the populist articulation of religions, which remains relatively underexamined, especially for non-Western polities. The subsequent section goes on to elaborate on the concepts of framing, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities in the social movements literature. It also lays out the benefits that accrue from using a social movements (SM) perspective in the analysis of contemporary populisms, particularly due to SM's sensitivity to grassroots dynamics and historical processes. The rest of the article draws on the tripartite theoretical scaffold of SM theory to explore religious populism in India, which has reached its zenith during Modi's rule in the post-2014 period. Each of

these three mechanisms attests to the centrality of religion's articulation as a majoritarian tool: in how "the people" are framed against the rest, in the religiously-inspired mobilizing networks and a quasi-sacralised Hindu leader, and the exploitation and further triggering of denominational violence for political gain.

By demonstrating the abundant utilization of Hinduism through these three mechanisms, the article draws upon an array of data such as the speeches, tweets, and books of key figures in the movement, websites of various *Sangh Parivar* fronts, newspaper articles, reports, as well as other historiographies and analyses on *hindutva*. Two theoretical propositions follow from the analysis: first, I put forward that a social movements approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of populism as more than a rhetorical framing tool based on a people-elite dichotomy. Populisms, including religiously-stimulated variants, often rely on various historically-rooted grassroots networks that seek ways to gain political power, which will be elucidated by the SM theory's analytical tools. Second, I argue that religion, as a cultural component of majoritarian politics, warrants more than the scant attention it has been given in populism scholarship. More particularly, shifting the focus beyond Western cases holds vast potential to expand the social scientific inquiry of the various ways in which national-populist movements get entangled with religions. The analysis further concludes that the BJP's religious populism has been straining India's democratic institutions and threatening the condition of religious minorities via its homogenizing project. The BJP's triumphant re-election in spring 2019 is likely to herald the exacerbation of these tendencies in the party's new term in power.

Populism, Nationalism, Religion
The scholarship on populism emphasizes the diverse aspects of the phenomenon as an ideology, political style, and economic policy (Müller 2016, Taggart 2000, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Despite the variety, there is a consensus

that all populisms forge a dichotomy between the virtuous and disadvantaged "people" versus the privileged and corrupt "elite". The dichotomy is accompanied by the presence of malicious "others", who are portrayed as collaborating with the elites to deprive the "real people" of their essential rights, values, and wellbeing. Against the threat of the elite-other alliance, populists are anti-pluralist by definition, claiming that "they, *and only they,* represent the people" to take back power (Müller 2016: 20). The populist leader often emerges as a "charismatic strongman", a person of action with a "gift of grace", a political outsider that bypasses traditional institutions to have a direct relationship with "the people" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 63-66). Understood as a homogenous and morally superior community, "the people" are the real owners of an idealized heartland (Taggart 2000), facing increasing contamination from the elites and others.

Populism's relationship with nationalism is a complicated one. I subscribe to the theoretical framework proposed by Brubaker (2019, 2017), which recognizes the analytical distinction between the two concepts, but rejects operationalizing them as sharply independent. Brubaker critiques "purist" and one-dimensional formulations where nationalism and populism are seen as separate horizontal and vertical discourses, respectively. In this view, nationalism constructs "the people" through an in/out dichotomy between the "nation" and outsiders, while populism is structured around a down/up antagonism between the people "as underdog" versus the elite (see, for instance, De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). While accepting these definitions, Brubaker (2019: 2, 10) devises a two-dimensional model of populism where the dual components are inherently "intersecting and mutually implicated", because "the tight interweaving of vertical and horizontal registers … is central to and constitutive of populist discourse". The ambiguity of multiple appeals to "the people" is precisely what gives populism its rhetorical and pragmatic power. To identify contemporary

right-wing mobilizations, Brubaker (2017: 1192) thus contends speaking of "a national-populist moment in the singular". This approach does not conflate populism with nationalism or reduce the latter into the former but highlights the "family resemblance" between the two systems of discourse (Brubaker 2019: 18).

How does religion come into play? Religiously-coloured populist and nationalist discourses are similarly fused. Religious nationalism is a distinctive kind of nationalism with discursive and institutional specificities. Discursively, it utilizes a sacred language to make "religion the basis for the nation's collective identity and the source of its ultimate value and purpose on earth" (Friedland 2001: 139). Institutionally, it establishes "links between politics and a particular religious group", privileges the majority religion via legal or other forms of favouritism, and "legitimates policy programs using religious values" (Soper and Fetzer 2018: 7). Much less studied, religious populism is "a form of populism that shares its conceptual centre but reproduces it in a specific religious key or fashion" (Zúquete 2017: 445). Religion similarly becomes an identity marker where populists mobilize religio-cultural resources to sacralise "the people" and moralise the cause, to reproduce a Manichean dichotomy of "good" versus "evil" against the elite-other coalition, and to inspire a mission of salvation (usually through a charismatic leader) (Arato and Cohen 2017, DeHanas and Shterin 2018).

National-populist engagement with religion is generally theologically impoverished and superficial. Such movements do not essentially embrace religion qua faith or doctrine, but lean on "religious tradition", that is, "the historical continuity of systems of symbols" that derive from religion, intermingling with ethnicity and nationality (Riesebrodt 2010: 55). Marzouki et al. (2016), for instance, demonstrate that virtually all right-wing populisms in the West discursively exploit Christianity (and Judaism in Israel) to fortify the border between "us" and "them"—often in a clash with the Church establishment. Sarkar et al. (1993), likewise, document the weak and opportunistic engagement of *hindutva* with the teachings of Hinduism. Yet while political appropriation devalues religion globally, the literature is increasingly sensitive to differences across cases, especially in the extent to which religion becomes constitutive in a given populist movement. Zùquete (2017: 460), for instance, distinguishes between "covert" and "overt" manifestations of religious populism and makes a call to expand to the non-Western world for better grasping such difference, because "the focus is still overwhelmingly Western-centric". DeHanas and Shterin (2018: 178) also indicate that non-Western religious populisms can possess distinctive characteristics. National-populist articulation of Islam in Turkey and Indonesia, Buddhism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, and Hinduism in India and Nepal may indeed demonstrate more "overtly" religious manifestations than their North Atlantic counterparts. Without falling into a "West and the rest" essentialism, what the literature presently needs is empirical (and comparative) studies of the variegated and culturally/geographically specific displays of the populism-religion nexus. To contribute to this emergent research agenda, I employ a social movements perspective in my analysis of the Indian case.

Framing, Mobilizing Structures, Political Opportunities

The SM literature highlights three elements in the analysis of collective action: framing processes, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities (Benford and Snow 2000, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, Tarrow 2011). Framing refers to how a social movement discursively creates the meaning and parameters of its contention. Mobilizing structures are about the social networks, organizations, and strategies of a given movement. Political opportunities concern the larger socio-institutional milieu that facilitates or hinders collective action. These three components are closely intertwined.

Political opportunities are events or processes that help a social movement advance its cause.

The literature highlights that these can range from shorter-term episodes such as wars, civil conflict, and international realignments to longer-term shifts such as demographic changes, industrialization, and prolonged unemployment. Opportunities can, therefore, denote brief openings for power change, or slow-paced currents stretched into multiple decades, providing the conditions for the emergence, sustainability, or success/failure of a movement (Tarrow 2011: 160, McAdam 1982: 40-43). Whether or not a movement can capitalize on such opportunities depends on its deployment of mobilizing structures. These refer to organizational networks providing membership, leadership, and communication mechanisms. Mobilizing structures are the "collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action" (McAdam et al. 1996: 3). Framing, finally, ignites, sustains, and develops mobilization by transforming the people's perception and emotions. It is the moral-cultural story that a movement tells itself, featuring the definition of the problem and attribution of blame, the identification of targets and strategies, and a call to action to ameliorate the situation (Benford and Snow 2000: 615).

Although both social movements and populism are primarily about mass mobilization against perceived elites, research on the two phenomena has mostly followed separate paths. To rectify the situation, a growing body of work proposes utilizing an SM perspective to advance the understanding of contemporary populisms (Roberts 2015). Aslanidis (2017), for instance, suggests seeing beyond the top-down rhetoric of the people versus the elite and underlines the investigation of populism's grassroots components. Jansen (2015), similarly, argues for shifting the attention from populism as a "thing" to "populist mobilization" as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. Another advantage of the SM outlook is that it inevitably brings in a historical dimension to the phenomenon studied because social movement scholars are aware that "important processes unfold over time", and

they "commonly find their way to history, sooner or later" (Markoff 2015: 68, 82). In my analysis of the Indian case, history features in two ways: in the twentieth-century evolution of *hindutva* as a national-populist movement, and in the movement's reframing of historical memory from a pro-Hindu standpoint.

An SM approach remains relevant even when populists end up taking political power (as is the case with *hindutva*). This is true for at least two reasons. First, as Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 7) elucidate, the study of contentious politics is not limited to insurgent/oppositional movements targeting the state. Governments can also be "initiators of claims", thus a legitimate object of analysis from an SM perspective. Second, as the scholarship dealing with populists in power confirm, populism is energized by a permanent state of collective mobilization even when ruling because it keeps on propagating the image of the elites still in control behind the scenes (Pappas 2019, Urbinati 2019). The rest of the article teases out how the three mechanisms of framing, mobilization, and opportunities play out in the case of religious populism in India.

The Long March of *Hindutva*

With its ideational origins dating back to the 19th century, the popularization of the term *hindutva* is owed to the writings of the Indian politician V.D. Savarkar in the 1920s. *Hindutva*'s ideological framework developed in reaction to the secular-universalist conception of nationalism forged by figures like Gandhi and Nehru before and after independence in 1947. Characterizing Congress as "the elite" disconnected from the (religious) values of "the people", *hindutva* favoured instead an ethno-religiously defined nationalism centred exclusively on the Hindu majority. Accordingly, "Indian culture was to be defined as Hindu culture, and the minorities [that is, the "others"] were to be assimilated by their paying allegiance to the symbols and mainstays of the majority as those of the nation" (Jaffrelot 2007: 5).

As deeply rooted as the suspicion towards secularism is *hindutva*'s hostility towards Islam and

Christianity. For Savarkar as well as K.B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS, the early 20th century pan-Islamic movement of Indian Muslims (known as the *Khilafat*) had to be countered by militant Hindu mobilization. Unlike Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, Islam and Christianity were identified as alien traditions forced by external powers, namely the Mughals and the British. Savarkar (1923: 110-113) wrote that to belong to India, one has to adhere to the "set of religions which we call Hindu dharma", which is "truly the offspring of this soil", whereas "Mohammedan or Christian communities … do not look upon India as their Holyland". Constituting the largest "non-Indian" religion, Islam was the primary threat. The India-Pakistan partition in 1947, a Hindu-Muslim conflict claiming up to 2 million lives and displacing 14 million according to some estimates, firmly entrenched the antagonistic perception towards Muslims.

The RSS (National Volunteer Corps) was established in 1925 to boost traditional Hindu values among the male youth. The movement organized itself in the image of European right-wing paramilitary groups, hosting various religio-nationally coloured activities of physical, martial, and ideological training. It expanded to thousands of *shakhas* (branches) across the country in a few decades, with an estimated 600,000 *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) at the time of the partition. The organization refused to ally with Congress during independence, criticizing Gandhi's non-violent philosophy and cooperation with Muslims. As a former RSS member killed Gandhi in 1948, Prime Minister Nehru temporarily banned RSS the same year—the first of three times after independence.

The RSS quickly realized that it needed more political weight to get ahead. *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (BJS, the precursor of the BJP) was founded in 1951. Yet in that decade, "Nehru's staunch insistence on state secularism and his watchfulness about the danger from the Hindu right, together with the lack of any issue favouring their rise, gave the organizations of the Hindu right a weak political presence" (Nussbaum 2008:

168). During the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, the BJS blamed Congress for its "weak" policies. At home, banning cow slaughter was a central policy item. As the 1971 census showed a mild decrease of Hindus since 1961 from 83.4% to 82.7%, the RSS stoked fears that Muslims and Christians would overwhelm Hindus. The demographic anxiety led the movement to be more inclusive toward the Dalits (formerly Untouchables), the most susceptible Hindu group to conversion. The BJS had modest yet steady success in its first two decades, rising from 3 seats in the general elections of 1951 to 14 in 1962 and 35 in 1967. Still, it was far from supplanting Congress as the major brokerage party in the 1950s and 1960s.

Communal Polarization as Political Opportunity
The BJP (Indian People's Party) was founded in 1980 as the novel instalment of the BJS, yet its political opportunities began to take shape in the previous decade. In the early 1970s, the BJS joined forces with other non-Congress groups to oppose the Indira Gandhi government, but the movement found itself banned for the second time during her state of emergency of 1975-1977. Providing the mainstay of the anti-Emergency coalition under the umbrella of the new Janata Party, the RSS and the BJS took part in a pro-democracy alliance. In the elections of 1977, Congress lost power for the first time after independence, while the BJS increased its seats to 94 as part of the Janata Party, with certain RSS veterans such as Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani holding key cabinet posts. The Janata government imploded in less than three years, and Congress returned to power in 1980, but the BJS came out of the experience as a legitimized force in Indian politics. The BJP built on this momentum starting from the 1980s. *Hindutva*, which was until then peripheral to Indian politics, began moving to the centre, especially with "the eruption of mass social movements and a political party … that represented a majoritarian, chauvinistic, anti-minority ideology of Hindu supremacism" (Bhatt 2001: 1).

A key factor for the meteoric rise of the BJP was the escalation of ethno-religious violence in the 1980s and 1990s. Certainly, communal violence was not the only political opportunity. The literature notes a combination of other factors such as Congress's inability to build legitimacy for neoliberal reform, the endorsement of big capital, increased corruption scandals, and other institutional frailties (Chacko 2018, Pardesi and Oetken 2008). I bring forth communal violence as an influential cultural phenomenon that intensified ethno-religious agitations to create an opportunity for the propagation of national-populist discourses. To name but a few: after her violent military offensive against Sikh separatism in Punjab, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh security guards in 1984, followed by anti-Sikh pogroms across the country leading to murders in the ten thousands. When his son Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi intervened in the Buddhist-Hindu conflict in Sri Lanka, he was killed by a Tamil suicide bomber in 1991. In notable episodes of Hindu-Muslim violence, independent riots claimed at least 400 lives in Moradabad in 1980, 300 in Ahmedabad in 1985, and 1,000 in Bhagalpur in 1989. The forced expulsion of Kashmiri Hindus by separatist Islamists in 1989-90 left a thousand Hindus dead and about half a million displaced. Sectarian violence, in short, became the order of the day.

The BJP and its grassroots networks were in a two-way engagement with communal conflict: they were both the benefiter of its spread, which normalized their ethno-religious identity politics, and they were also instigators of further tensions via provocation or direct violence. Two key issues placed the BJP in a leading position. First, in the Shah Bano Affair of 1985, when an Indian Supreme Court decision on divorce undermined Islamic private law in favour of the national civil code, Congress passed a bill to nullify the decision and upheld the jurisdiction of Muslim courts. The BJP attacked the "pseudo-secularism" of Congress, namely that secularism was a camouflage to undermine Hindu interests against minority religions. Second, in the Ayodhya Incident of the late 1980s, the BJP initiated a nation-wide campaign to restore a traditional Hindu pilgrimage site in Uttar Pradesh, believed to be the birthplace of the god Lord Rama, which was replaced by the Babri Mosque in the sixteenth century by the Mughals. RSS volunteers, led by the BJP leader Advani (together with his then young acolyte Modi) began a cross-country pilgrimage to commemorate Lord Rama, depicted as a hypermasculine militaristic symbol of the nation. Decade-long propaganda eventually paid off: in 1992, *hindutva* militants destroyed the mosque brick by brick, and around 2,000 people died in the ensuing communal violence in Ayodhya, with an additional thousand in Bombay six weeks later. The RSS was provisionally banned for the third and last time after the incident.

The strategy to capitalize on and further provoke violent communalism was quickly translated into votes. "Hindu-Muslim violence improved the BJP's electoral performance in the 1990s", increasing its representation in the legislature from 2 seats in 1984 to 85 in 1989, 120 in 1991, and 161 in 1996, with its percentage of votes rising from 7.7% to 20.3% within roughly a decade (Wilkinson 2004: 50). The electoral victory of 1998, where the party received 25.6% of the votes and 182 seats in the parliament, heralded a six-year-long BJP-led coalition government, with Vajpayee serving as the Prime Minister. In power, the BJP somewhat moderated its aggressive policy agenda to keep the coalition intact and sought to consolidate itself as the alternative brokerage party to Congress. Still, the lasting effect of the 1998-2004 period was "a redefinition of Indian democracy from a secular … basis to a … fully majoritarian entity, and the entrenchment of communalism and communal politics" (Ogden 2012: 22-23). *Hindutva* thus became mainstream at the turn of the 21st century.

Mobilization Networks
The RSS and Sangh Parivar
The RSS played a central role in the post-1980 violence. Writing on the BJP, Ahmad (2016: 174) notes its "uniqueness", namely that "it is not an

independent party at all but only a mass political front of a seasoned and semi-secret organization, the RSS". Indeed, the RSS is an extensive socio-political force in India, claiming to be the world's largest voluntary missionary organization with 58,967 *shakhas* in 2018, with estimated membership over 5 million people. *Shakhas* are run by full-time organizers/preachers called *pracharak.* RSS members are identified by their single uniform of khaki shorts and white shirts. As it expanded, the RSS added various new fronts to its *shakha*-based network, giving birth to *Sangh Parivar*, a large family of *hindutva* organizations.

While the RSS was an exclusive men's club, the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti* (National Women Volunteers Committee) was founded in 1936 as the women's wing, currently holding about 5,000 *shakhas* and about 2 million members. Targeting leftist student movements, *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (All Indian Student Council) was established in 1949 as a right-wing student body. Often collaborating with *Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha* (Indian People Youth Front, founded in 1978), the Council has since taken active roles in multiple violent episodes and it is presently India's largest student union with 3 million members. Also regarding education, a network of RSS schools, *Vidya Bharati* (Indian Knowledge) was created in 1977. The network defines its goal as "building a generation … committed to Hindutva and infused with patriotic fervour", and runs 12,754 formal and 12,618 informal schools across India with 3.3 million students (Vidya Bharati 2019). This is in addition to *Ekal Vidyalaya* (Foundation of Solo Schools, established in 1986), functioning in rural and tribal zones with over 81,112 schools and 2 million students (Ekal Vidyalaya 2019).

Sangh Parivar is also active in the world of labour. *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh* (Indian Workers' Union, founded in 1955) is India's largest trade union with approximately 10 million members. Its agenda identifies "national interest … as supreme", and defends that "the class concept … is a fiction", and it "would ultimately result in the disintegration of the nation" (BMS 2019).

Likewise, *Bharatiya Kisan Sangh* (Indian Farmers' Collective, formed in 1979) endorses cooperation between "landowners and agricultural labourers" and rejects "suicidal propagandas such as class struggle" (BKS 2019). On the religious front, *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (All-Hindu Council, VHP) was founded in 1964 to unite different Hindu sects in a church-like centralized structure. An essential front of *Sangh Parivar*, the VHP defines itself as "the indomitable force of the Hindu society for the protection of its core values" and the "the increased expression of Hindu pride and unity" (VHP 2019). *Bajrang Dal* and *Durga Vahini* were founded in 1984 and 1991 to serve as the youth and women's wings of the VHP, respectively.

Sangh Parivar also comprises several dozen *hindutva* organizations including news and communication networks, think tanks, social welfare providers, development agencies, and rural/tribal associations, among others. According to Jaffrelot (2005: 10), despite occasional internal disagreements between the RSS, the VHP, and the BJP, these bodies unite in the objective "to penetrate society in depth, at the grassroots level, and to convert it into Hindu nationalism". The BJP maintains a synergetic relationship with this massive network. When in power between 1998-2004, the party appointed *Sangh Parivar* affiliates to innumerable administrative posts, allowing it to rest on extra-state powers and anti-minority mobilization. In February 2002, the horrific episode of anti-Muslim violence in the state of Gujarat, where Modi was the Chief-Minister, demonstrated one such collaboration. Following the burning of a train in Godhra that killed 59 Hindus, Modi declared the event, without proof, a terrorist attack by Pakistan's intelligence agency and local Muslims. During the next three days, anti-Muslim pogroms took the lives of 2,000 people according to independent tallies. As in many other riots, the attacks were carried out by Hindu militants from the *Bajrang Dal*, the VHP, RSS and others, and there is evidence to suggest that the police and BJP officials cooperated in the killings (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012).

Modi: "King of Hindus' Hearts"

Complementing *Sangh Parivar*, the personalized political communication tools around Modi himself deserve attention as a permanent mobilizing structure. To be sure, Modi is not India's first populist politician—that title is credited to Indira Gandhi. Moreover, religio-national-populist rhetoric was inherent to *hindutva* since its inception. Yet it was Modi "who most powerfully refined and embodied a repertoire of *hindutva* populism as a political strategy, first in his state of Gujarat and then at the national level … Modi rearranged the politics of the BJP in particular and that of Hindu nationalism in general around his person" (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017: 184). In other words, Modi did not make *hindutva* populist, but he elevated the movement to its most forceful populist moment. Starting in 1971, Modi served as a full-time RSS *pracharak* for 14 years before being assigned to the BJP in 1985. Rising quickly within the party, Modi, branded as "the defender of the Hindu faith", was appointed Chief-Minister of Gujarat in 2001 (as the previous Chief-Minister had health issues). In the state elections that took place months after the 2002 pogrom, Modi's campaign leaned extensively on Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim overtones, with one slogan casting him as *Hindu hriday samrat* (King of Hindus' Hearts). He won the elections and was reappointed with ten additional BJP seats in the state legislature.

As Chief-Minister in Gujarat (2001-2014), Modi hired an American public relations company to carefully construct a self-image as the champion of Hinduism, a man of "the people" who can identify with lower castes and classes, and a pragmatic leader with a miracle economic recipe—the so-called "Gujarat model". Via digital technology, Modi gradually bypassed the mainstream media (and to a certain extent, his party structure) to communicate directly with the people through emails, SMS, MMS, WhatsApp, his own TV channel (NaMo), and 3D holograms to simultaneously replicate his rallies in multiple locations. Such strategies were perfected at the national level during the election campaign of 2013-4, which held a "360-degree" approach— "whichever way you turned and wherever you looked, you would see Modi" (Price 2015: 213). The campaign also brought forth "vote mobilizers", thousands of devout volunteers functioning parallel to the BJP organization, paying direct allegiance to Modi himself (Pradeep and Ostermann 2014). With his mobilizers, various communication channels, the RSS support, and a billion-dollar campaign budget, Modi embarked on a high-tech campaign to saturate the public scene.

As Prime Minister, Modi quickly overwhelmed the media. In 2014, he started a monthly radio show titled "From the Heart", diffused in 18 languages by the national broadcaster All-India Radio. India's private media conglomerates are either owned BJP supporters or financially reliant on the government. The Prime Minister rarely makes a public appearance without prior orchestration, nor does he hold press conferences or allow journalists to travel with him. Instead, he actively uses social media: as of July 2019, he had about 50 million followers on Twitter, and 44 million and 25 million on Facebook and Instagram, respectively. The "Modi selfie" became the signature of the leader promoted by his social media team. In what Rao (2018: 166) calls "selfie nationalism", Modi's deified image is centred around a "belief in right-wing Hinduism, a relentless advocacy for business, his presentation of himself as both a global leader and a commoner … and his silence on minority rights, poverty, free press, judiciary and legislative processes, and India's plural religious traditions". Modi proves to be a mobilizing structure in his own right.

Religio-Populist Framing: Secular Congress against "the People"

Corroborating Brubaker's (2017, 2019) two-dimensional model, the BJP's core framing task rests on a national-populist platform where the two meanings of "the people" as an ethno-culturally defined "nation" and as a non-elite "underdog" merge in inseparable ways. Vertical opposition to Congress (on top) and non-Hindu

minorities (on the bottom) is tightly interwoven with the horizontal characterization of these groups as "internal outsiders" to the nation, who supposedly collaborate with "external outsiders"—primarily Pakistan. Congress is to blame for all ills. A comparative study of Modi's Twitter activity found "group insults" as a prevalent communication style, mostly directed at Congress (Gonawela et al. 2018: 314). Modi calls Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, the grandson of Indira Gandhi, a "shahzada" (princeling) of the "Delhi Sultanate". With such Islamic references, he not only characterizes Gandhi as "the elite", but also implies his affiliation with "the others". In contrast, Modi stresses his own "underdog" background as a *chaiwala* (tea seller) who rose from "pariah to PM", and wears his iconic short-sleeved "Modi kurta" and saffron colours as a humble yet anointed Hindu leader (Sen 2016). In some posters, he is even sacralised "with a halo indicating Hindu symbolism of gods who glow like *surya* (the sun god)" (Rao 2018: 177). Overall, Modi personally embodies the affective promotion of *hindutva* in India with his attire, language, and exclusive participation to Hindu ceremonies and sacred sites. In the process, he appropriates the symbolic power of Hinduism to portray himself as a sanctified leader of "the people".

Equation of "the people" to Hinduism is manifested abundantly in the messages of *hindutva* leaders. "All people living in India are Hindu by identity and nationality" is one such pronouncement by Mohan Bhagwat, the leader of RSS (Hindustan Times 19 September 2018). Another statement was on the slogan *Bharat Mata Ki Jai* (hail mother India), which personifies the country as a Hindu goddess. Devendra Fadnavis, BJP's Chief Minister of Maharashtra, uttered that "those who refuse to say the slogan have no right to stay in India" (The Hindu 4 April 2016). Modi begins each rally with *Bharat Mata Ki Jai*. In December 2018, when Gandhi reproached him for exploiting the slogan, Modi retorted that despite Congress's "fatwa" (once again, an Islamic reference), he would recite it "ten times" (Economic Times 4 December 2018). In another

comment, Modi charged Congress for "slaughtering calves … and eating beef" to insult the Hindu tradition (India Today 19 November 2018). Such gestures entrench the scapegoating of the secular Congress as inherently anti-Hindu.

Written under Nehru's leadership, the Indian Constitution of 1950 was built on secular principles. It declared no state religion, guaranteed religious freedoms, banned discrimination on the basis of religion and caste, and abolished "untouchability" as a socio-religious practice. In 1976, Indira Gandhi amended the Constitution to declare the Republic "secular". *Hindutva* condemned secularism as an elite conspiracy since the beginning, "imposed from above" by Congress to undermine "the religious sensibilities of the Hindu masses from below" (Soper and Fetzer 2018: 186). The RSS website complains of the "erosion of the nation's integrity in the name of secularism", arguing that "it would have been logical for our post-1947 rulers to restructure the national life in keeping with our culture" (RSS 2019). Pro-*hindutva* intellectuals like to talk of Congress' "pseudo-secularism" as a manipulation device to appease minorities and harm Hindus. In the words of one such writer, "behind the secular smokescreen … every anti-Hindu fanaticism of non-Hindus was respected as their 'minority identity' … while the Hindu was supposed to have no identity at all" (Chitkara 2004: 160). The pseudo-secularism discourse tackles what it considers as non-Hindu favouritism in three main policy issues: the absence of a common civil code (as witnessed in the 1985 Shah Bano Affair), reservations (a form of affirmative action) for religious minorities, and the Article 370 of the Constitution granting autonomous status to the Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir (which was revoked by the government in August 2019 as the final version of this article was prepared). In line with its credo "justice for all, appeasement of none", the BJP has wowed to reverse these policies in election manifestos, because as Modi once put it, Congress should stop hiding behind the "burqa of secularism" (Times of India 14 July 2013).

The systematic rewriting of history is central to the BJP's framing practices. Since the party took power in some states and later nationally in the 1990s, school textbooks were overhauled. Focusing on India's ancient past, *hindutva* historians intentionally conflate the Vedic period with the Indus Valley Civilization to claim that all Hindus come from a pure Aryan ancestry. This narrative mixes history and religious myth to imply that non-Hindus, "especially the Muslim minority", are foreign to the national body (Thapar 2005: 200). Post-8th century Indian history is thus recounted as an eternal religious battle between Hindus and Muslims. Fittingly, the BJP website depicts India's history as a heroic saga, where the nation "resisted external oppression" to protect "its *intrinsic* identity"—"Hindu identity … being the mainstay of the Indian nation" (BJP 2019). In 2017, the government appointed a 14-person special committee to "prove" its historical outlook via archaeological finds and DNA records to further alter textbooks (Reuters 6 March 2018).

The BJP also consistently reframes the 20th century Indian experience to conform to the *hindutva* worldview, which tells a story of national unity betrayed by Congress and Muslims. Although the RSS did not join the independence movement, its advocates today falsely claim that it has courageously taken part in it, while some school textbooks deleted references to Nehru, omitted Gandhi's assassination by a former RSS member, and referred to Congress as a "nurtured baby" of the British (Hindustan Times 25 July 2017). Meanwhile, Hindu nationalist Sardar Patel is refurbished via the world's biggest statue, a national holiday, and an annual award in his name. Modi stated that if Patel had been Prime Minister instead of Nehru, the partition would have never occurred (The Hindu 7 February 2018). Vinay Katiyar, a BJP MP, further claimed that since Muslims "were responsible for the partition, there was no need for them to stay in India … They should settle in Bangladesh and Pakistan" (Economic Times 7 February 2018). The rewriting of history caters directly to the

BJP's framing, where the secular Congress and Muslims are working against the interest of the "the people"—the Hindu majority.

Conclusions

According to Jaffrelot and Tillin (2017: 188), "the Hindu nationalist variant of populism poses a threat to India's democracy because of its exclusivist overtone" and a majoritarian understanding of politics, and religious "minorities may end up as second-class citizens". The BJP's religious populism is indeed beginning to indicate grave consequences: between 2014 and 2017, communal violence in India increased by 28%, where Muslims were most often the victims, and Hindus the perpetrators (The Washington Post 31 October 2018). Many of these events comprised a rising new phenomenon called "cow vigilantism", involving individuals suspected of slaughtering or trafficking cattle being lynched by mobs. Since 2017, the government doubled down on anti-conversion laws in BJP-controlled states to prevent Christian and Muslim proselytizing, with occasional debates to make it a national law. It is thus of no surprise that the 2018 *Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom* (2018: 162) designated India as a country where violations of religious freedoms are "systematic, ongoing, and egregious", and found that communal violence is "often caused by inflammatory speeches delivered by leaders of Modi's party". The BJP's victorious reelection in spring 2019, where Modi escalated military tensions with Pakistan throughout the campaign, is likely to exacerbate these tendencies in the party's new term in power.

The Indian case offers ample evidence to suggest that religion can emerge as a central cultural theme for contemporary populisms, despite the lack of sufficient attention accorded to it in the literature. One reason for the understating of religion in the populism canon may be its primarily Western focus, where Christianity arguably gets articulated in a more "covert" fashion (Zúquete 2017). For North Atlantic populists, as Marzouki et al. (2016) demonstrate, while Christianity is

certainly employed as a discriminatory civilizational identity against (mostly Muslim) immigrants, the association with religious content or congregations/institutions is weaker than the case of *hindutva*. None of the Western examples seem to possess the same level of "overt" discursive, organizational, and strategic entanglement with the majority religion as do the Hindu populists.

To demonstrate the religion-populism nexus in a non-Western example, this article drew on the social movements literature to study the framing practices, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities of *hindutva*. Each of these mechanisms shows that Hinduism constitutes a key building block of the BJP's national-populist programme: not only in the framing of "the people" versus the rest in identity and memory, but also mobilization through a religiously motivated network and a quasi-sacralised Hindu leader, and the active manipulation of sectarian violence for political advancement. The *hindutva* example further confirms the suggestion (Aslanidis 2017, Jansen 2015, Roberts 2015) that a social movements perspective can enrich the study of populism as a dynamic and historically embedded phenomenon involving grassroots mobilization. Further empirical case studies and cross-religious and cross-regional comparisons involving Western and non-Western polities would help refine the theoretical framework on the variegated and culturally/geographically specific ways in which national-populist movements interact with religions in the 21st century.

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