

HINDUTVA AND POPULIST POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF TRANSFORMED ROLE OF HINDU NATIONALISM FROM IDEOLOGY TO PRAXIS

INTRODUCTION

Populism has been described in various ways, taking it as ideology, movement, a particular style or repertoire of politics. Populist Politics becomes the strategy broadly used by every political party under democratic governance for its larger acceptance recognition and legitimacy. Populism as a phenomenon is not confined to any specific ideology. It is a strategic game runner for both the left and the right-wing political participants. Divergent forms of populist appeal could be seen in the politics of larger democratic countries like India. Within the discourse of populism, there are various elements that are used together to create a definition of 'we the people' a necessary rhetoric that constructs the ideal of equality. Populism as a strategy is an important key for the political parties and organizations in a country like India where politics of representation is mostly instituted through differences. Every political organization and a party that needs a larger outcome through its mobilizations should formulate a newer terrain of political representation or ways of appeasement. In case of India, this newer terrain is constructed not from any alien ideologies but something that is constituent of the popular beliefs of the people. The history, the present economic and social context should be under consideration for the construction of populist policies that can attract a large number of masses. Laclau defines Populism as an ideology that has a core idea of the logic of equivalence and it is this logic that can subvert the existing differences (Laclau 2005). Both the left-wing and right-wing populists engrave on this logic of equivalence but with a difference in approach. A broader analysis of these differences and convergences of the right-wing and the left-wing populism should be evaluated for a larger picture of the Political ideologies these groups reflects and practices on.

POPULIST HINDUTVA: CONVERTING EQUALITY THROUGH PRODUCING DIFFERENCES

Populism of Hindutva can be defined simultaneously as a movement and an ideology. Looking at the political changes that India had been undergoing nationally and regionally, most of the scholars worldwide define the Modi regime as Populist. Since 2014, after NDA

secured its majority in the Parliament there is a greater shift in the politics of Sangh Parivar. The electoral win was a part and further boost for the process of spreading Sangh ideology in the region and transnationally. The current trends of Hindutva mobilization in the country are evolved through organized populist politics that converges and span across national to the regional. The politics of Hindutva is based on “We the people”, but that ‘we’ belong to a specific category of people that are Hindus. Their working structure that centres from the ground level orients towards the politics of Hindutva by making people conscious and assertive of ‘we are the Hindu’.

If People in populism refers to ethnos rather than demos (Akkerman 2014) that would reflect its potential to build an ethnocentric politics. Hindutva nationalists articulates a politics that could converge the ethnos towards the demos, constructing the latter through an assertive former. The Politics of BJP since 2014 could be seen as populist centric exploring novel ways of infiltrating Hindu nationalism through the Modi wave. Partha Chatterjee argues that “the triumph of Modi is built on two projects that are the representation of Modi as the unquestioned populist leader who could be trusted to defend the nation’s security, and two, the long-term project of nationalism defined by the Hindu majority’ (Chatterjee 2019). It is the second reason that constitutes the long term agendas of the Sangh and trying to make it a visionary for the Hindus. The Hindutva pracharaks could move beyond the image of modi that they had constructed for popular mass appeal, converting the image of modi to the larger representation of Hindu population. Hindutva’s populism is potentially stronger as it is not represented by me the people, but how to constitute a stronger and united “we the people”. Religion here becomes a tool that can be used both for unity and for divisive politics.

CULTURAL NATIONALISM AS A POPULIST TOOL: ROLE OF SABARIMALA

The historical judgment by the Supreme Court on 28th September 2018, lifting the ban on women of menstrual age to enter the famous shrine of Ayyappan, the Sabarimala temple in Kerala had led to violent reactions and protests across the state. The virtual and real modes of violence had been propagated immensely generating the fear of threat in society. This violence towards women during Sabarimala season had showcased the enigma of the Kerala society always claimed to be modern and enlightened. What could be the reasons that are deeply embedded behind such reactionary outrage? The way in which women are treated by culture is of considerable importance as that would give a picture of the gender relations that

exist in society (Okin 1999). This would give an answer to how the masculine spaces are framed within the terrain of religion and its expansion to the secular terrain of modern society. Gender relations are constituted within the family, community, and state (Hasan 2000). These relations are being framed and reframed in consolidating Hindutva politics. Popularizing and politicizing the sentiment of believers had a larger goal of evoking religious-nationalist feelings, the premise on which the rightist parties mobilizes the masses. The process of politicization of religion could be through these foci that can lead to broader and deeper appeasement.

Sabarimala has been considered as a tool for spreading the religious-nationalist consciousness in Kerala that was popularized in the rest of India through the Ram Mandir issue. Placing gender into the terrain of ritual and the sacred legitimizes the dominant masculine space on which the politics of assertion is constituted. The politics of religious nationalism are constructed here by exemplifying a threatened Hindu majority by the policies and interventions of rational state mechanisms.

The religious aspects of Indian nationalism were difficult for Indians to consume until the popularization of the Ram Mandir issue. The nationalization of the issue of Ram Mandir had a greater role in the emergence of the Hindutva nationalism of BJP. The potential of the Ram Mandir and sacred centre to recreate Hindu nationalism to a broader level was seen to be rightly explored during this time. But it had been difficult for BJP to expand its electoral politics towards the south through the symbolization of Rama Rajya. The religious-cultural tradition and the symbolization through god are different in the regions of the south within the Hindu religious sect. While most of north India could relate with 'Jai Hind Jai Ram' the slogan that had been raised during Ram Janmbhoomi processions, people in the southern region were unaffected with the issue. Such a homogenization became a difficult task for BJP in delivering its politics here. Sabarimala was received as a long awaited tool for the Hindu right to enhance the homogenization of Hindutva feeling among the Hindus. This homogenization of Hindu identity is enhanced through the imaginary populist politics over which Sabaramila has become a comprehensive tool.

The politicization of the Sabarimala issue has a specific regional context. Kerala has never seen tremendous ultra-right support when it comes to electoral politics. BJP could not attain a single seat in Loksabha elections yet but historically achieved its long-awaited MLA for the party in 2016 state elections. Building an electoral base in the southern state of the country is

seen to be one of the primary agendas of its national leaders as they frequently make visits to the state giving much attention to state politics and to mobilize people through populist speeches. Sabarimala is another symbol of affirmation of religious identity that as a variable could contribute to the expansion of Hindu nationalist feeling legitimately in the public sphere reigniting religious sentiments.

The focus that has given to Sabarimala and Ayyappan also has its own importance, it is a temple where worshippers from all the other regional states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamilnadu pays their visits. Maintaining the sacred and purity of the temple helps in appeasing the pilgrim crowd that would also help in the process of politicization of the issue with the demand of the believers. Sacred centres are considered as the foci of the religious identity (Van der veer 1994). The important role played by sacred centres in the construction of religious communities in India is continued for the process of cultivating Hindu Nationalism. Enunciation of politics centred on the sacred is one of the key elements of religious nationalism that had become evident through the Ram Mandir issue.

Religion in its institutional approach has a role that can influence the popular beliefs of the people that would also effect to form the consciousness of the people. This has created a shift in Hindutva politics in the state from a micro religious organization to macro politics of the state through broader engagements in the public sphere. The emergence of Hindu nationalism and huge support for BJP in most parts of India as a more dominant political force than ever before has enhanced this shift. It could be argued that this is prelusive to the saffron wave in the state. Congress's supports for inflicting violence post the judgment gave legitimization for the acts of the Sangh pracharaks and their closely connected groups. The very feature of the Sabarimala movement would be the alignment of the hard and soft neo-Hindutva (Anderson 2015). Edward Anderson had framed 'Neo-Hindutva' as a way to identify and understand 'idiosyncratic expressions of Hindu nationalism which operate outside of the institutional and ideological framework of the Sangh Parivar. "The hard neo-Hindutva groups that constitute a cluster of individuals and interests that loudly expound Hindu chauvinism and cultural nationalism could easily appeal the soft Hindutva groups regularly appearing to be mainstream representatives of 'the Hindu community' in multiculturalist settings, but avoiding overt associations with the Hindutva network for diplomatic and pragmatic reasons, out of principle and to be, ostensibly, more inclusive" (Anderson and Longman 2018).

POPULAR BELIEFS AND POPULIST POLITICS: THE ROLE OF RELIGION

Populism is a form of democratic politics in which an organisation or a leader is able to rhetorically connect to the different unfulfilled demands of a variety of groups into a single chain of equivalence by claiming that they are all demands of the authentic people that are being denied by a powerful elite (Chatterjee 2019). State and the constitutional mechanisms on which a democratic state is based is considered as securitizing agents by the citizens. In the question of religion, if these mechanisms becomes a threat for the beliefs and rituals of the common people, could affect the legitimacy on which it has been premised. Sabarimala judgement was received as a threat for the existence of the Hindu majoritarian beliefs. Those who share these beliefs and practices becomes members of a community and thus the community demands supreme allegiance from practicing individuals. If the Hindus are mobilized for the protection of the rituals considered to be sacred by them this can help in creating the identity of homogeneous Hindu and their fight for the same would become greater example for the rest of Hindus in the country. The only agenda of the sangh in this issue is the process of Hinduization. It is through the norms of sacred and purity the group affirmation is built by the sangh, any activity that obstructs it can largely affect its legitimacy that it had constructed since long.

Kinnvall argues that the imaginary populist politics in India now reinvent “nationhood” “religion” and “Hindu masculinity” that comprises go form a symbol of security for majoritarian India (Kinnvall 2019). Certain tools are necessary to make these constantly visible in the public, as the main task of this kind of politics is to create memories for the people so that it can sustain for long. Women’s entry into Sabarimala was such a tool that could realign all these parameters of nationhood, religion and Hindu masculinity together. It is on these premises the Sabarimala issue has been popularized by the Hindutva propagandists.

What we have to understand in the context of Sabarimala issue is how certain issues are promoted as naturally crucial to the self-respect of a community that is portrayed as a homogeneous whole, as if it were an individual. This makes us to argue that in that respect Hindutva had won ideologically and electorally to a greater extent pursuing the goals they had intended. Victimhood of Hindu through threatening their beliefs and practices became a legitimizing strategy for vindictive politics. The mobilization of the people for the movement

was not coercive. A believing Hindu could not easily dissociate themselves from this compulsion and thus they were unconsciously led to endorse the Hindutva programme, even if they did not subscribe to communal politics. The force of public opinion being a decisive factor in a democracy campaigning for its support is a legitimate method for realising political and religious goals (Panikkar 1993). A common fallacy is that these passions are natural and the violent struggle is an explosion of pent up feelings (Van der veer 1994). Even this movement has been constructed on the same path.

Activists' violence purportedly redeems the honour of groups that they claim have been victimized. Within and through violence, people may find opportunities to both circumvent and assume the powers of the state. "Nothing so inspires group violence against outsiders or perceived transgressors as the sense that the group is carrying out a legal, law-making or law-preserving mission," "Armed with the belief that it is acting in the name of law, a group of rioters feels like a state itself, a body politic" (Weisberg 1995). Sabarimala could be seen as a first tool in hand that politicizes religion in Kerala for the project of Hindutva for a macro programme.

Oommen refers to cultural nationalism as an articulation of popular aspirations by the people to preserve and nurture their natural bonds rooted in religion, caste, tribe, language or religion (Oommen 1990). Nationalism is a congruence of culture and power, a powerful nationalist sentiments that is deeper and broader could be articulated through such a tactical innovation of both. Cultural nationalism rooted in the religious identity is the primary and the longer agenda of the BJP. The state of Kerala that is known for secular and democratic politics was considered to be a space that is undesirable for Hindu nationalism. It has altogether a different trajectory as it is ideological Hindutva that took precedence over electoral Hindutva in the state (Arafath 2019). Kerala is a state considered to be endorsed by the Malayali cultural nationalism, thus becomes difficult for Hindu nationalist forces to destroy it. Now it has become necessary for the Hindu nationalist to expand its base electorally to make itself a dominant democratic force in the country. The materialization of their goals are seen to be successful even in Kerala, though in a slower pace.

**“UPLIFT THE RENAISSANCE VALUES, JOIN THE WOMEN’S WALL”:
DEFENCE AGAINST HINDUTVA**

The counter-offensive from liberal and left quarters against the Hindutva-wave have been loaded with phrases like ‘fundamentalism’, ‘medievalism’, ‘fascism’ and ‘atavism’ had been very common in the public sphere of Kerala(Hansen 1993). Unlike north India, Kerala has not witnessed any Hindu Sangathan and Hindu sabhas movement that could crystalize Hindu nationalism to a larger mass. The religious reformation movements in the state to a certain level had eradicated the discriminations that exist in the Hindu religious sect. All those reformations that had positively affected the modern social formations in the state termed to be defined as Kerala Renaissance. The political nature of the state beginning from these reformation movements constricted the expansion of the Sangh base in the state. In the political landscape of Kerala, the active participation of Political parties from small to large has resulted to lose the difference between pressure groups and political parties (Mannathukkaren 2016). The democratic politics and the public sphere in the state is strongly share a close and conjoined positive relation.

Mobilizing religious sentiment and engaging in violence have refashioned community and gender identities. Women are key actors in most social movements, including Hindu nationalist movements. Gendered appeals have featured prominently in Hindu nationalist campaigns, particularly when they have been violent (Basu 2015). The BJP and the Hindutva supporters could mobilize large number of women who asserted that they deny the entry of women into Sabarimala. The women here become the voices that appraises Hindu masculinity and justifies the violence perpetuated through it.

As a counter politics a woman’s wall had been organized in the state starting from Kasaragod of north to Trivandrum in the south to uplift the support for the Supreme Court verdict and to claim equality of Gender. Mobilisation of women to participate in the wall was led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its affiliated organisations. The left-wing democratic front in the state that constitutes Communist Party of India (Marxist) one of the majoritarian parties in the state that works through the cadre system had supported and mobilized people in defence of the Supreme Court verdict. But secondary changes in the opinions at the cadre level were well noticed after the mass failures during the Loksabha elections 2019.

Left political parties and organizations in the region places themselves against the expansion of the Sangh politics. Mouffe argues on the relevance of Left Populism over the right wing

populism to create a radical reformism. If the left want to formulate such a radical reformist project it has to give importance for the popular beliefs and emotions of the people rather than acting rationally. * The decisive politics of the communist party has also changed drastically. With parliamentary and electoral competition now dominating the party policies, communism as a social movement had declined (Mannathukkaren 2010). It would make us to doubt over the potential project of radical reformism of the left in the state.

LEFT WING AND RIGHT WING POPULISM: A KERALA EXPERIENCE

BJP has remained only a marginal force in Kerala for most of its history mostly invisible in the public political arena(Mannathukkaren 2016). But this does not mean that their political aspirations are absentee here, rather they mobilized people in the ground creating strong defenders of Hindutva ideology, “the workers who live for the politics than living from politics” (Jaffrelot 1996). Their work has expanded through cultural forums, temple associations, health care missions and schools altogether making of Hindutva as a praxis.

The associations and meetings centred on the small temples in the local regions in Kerala has greater role in inflicting the politics of Hindutva into the believers (Panikkar 2003). This has greatly elevated the Hindutva mission in the region not showing its public face. Such associations and interactions with people sharing similar beliefs creates an ontological security. Here securitization has been viewed as a key political process in the containment of anxiety and the production of ontological security, leading to an emphasis on the ‘securitization of subjectivity’. Cultivation of Hindu nationalism through consciously made speeches and conversations helps to create the communal other. Every meeting that are being conducted intensifies the search for one stable identity in order to reduce ontological insecurity and existential anxiety’ (Kinnvall 2006). But this ontological insecurity is not an effect of the insecurities that they had faced, rather an ideological base could be stronger and sensitive only if the group has a feeling of ontological security that can be used as a larger tool for expanding religious nationalism. A thrive for Hindu nationalism is effectively based upon this ontological security. In the regional localities temple has become the centre of formation of Hindutva politics and the emergence of a movement, through mobilizing the believers, it provides opportunities for inducing and maintaining ‘collective identities’ and a sense of ‘community and has become visible and legitimate in the public sphere of Kerala

actively engaging with the masses even through media newsroom conversations. The role of media and the news debates for this change cannot be devalued that had been giving them role to deliver their agendas and duties. The post sabarimala scenario had helped the right wing to formulate a culturalised version of Hindutva in defence of Hindu rituals beliefs and practices.

The real success of Hindutva is its successful re-definition of the idiom of politics, of commonsensical political rationality and ethos of the so-called political mainstream in a more belligerent, majoritarian and populist direction (Hansen 1993). “A study done by Lokniti-Centre for the study of developing societies (CSDS) clearly shows how NDA successfully secured more than 38 % of the upper castes vote in Kerala in 2019 general elections”. Sabarimala was strategically used by the BJP for the electoral advancements is clear though they had not occupied any seats in the Loksabha elections. The results of this general election show a tremendous inclination among the majority of voters to adopt the social, moralistic and ideological sensibilities of Hindutva (Arafth 2019).

In the electoral arena of Kerala ‘Caste was more central to the ascriptive hierarchy than was religion’. The vote bank of the communist party is based on the caste based mobilizations. The politics of sangh in electoral politics is not different to that, but their long term intention is to create a strategic vote bank for Hindutva, thus to mobilize through religion. The nationalist politics of the sangh and the Marxist politics of the left in Kerala make you to conclude that the ‘so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational (Cavanaugh 2014).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The populist reference to the people never aims at an integration of the people as a whole, but only refers to the ‘good people’, identified on the basis of an imaginary construction of the true nature of the popular identity (Canovan 1999). Both the left and the rightist populist politics mobilizes the masses to form their category of the good people, those asserts their ideologies of Politics.

The substance of Hindutva has to be analysed from how it is perceived to be seen in the civil society and the public sphere. The violence that has been perpetuated through Sabarimala had been normalized to a larger extent as was seen as necessary for protecting the rights of the

believers. It was only the symbolic violence of Hindutva that was prevalent, but it was expanded in bringing the Sabarimala issue into the public the BJP has succeeded in legitimating what has been called as “banal Hindutva,” or the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist views that were once thought to be outside the political norm but today are viewed as routine elements of everyday Indian politics (Harris; Corbridge: Jeffrey 2017)

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