

Research Article

Hindu Populism and the Rise of the BJP

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Abstract

This study takes the political transformation of India during the 1980s as its starting point, a period that marked the shift from the long-standing dominance of the Indian National Congress to the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It aims to explore how India gradually transitioned from a constitutionally defined secular state to a political order increasingly oriented toward Hinduism. Using populism as the core theoretical framework, this paper analyzes how the BJP strategically constructed a binary opposition between the “political elite,” represented by the Congress Party, and the “common people,” and how it employed religious symbols, sacred imagery, and Hindu cultural narratives to mobilize mass support. By linking religious identity with political mobilization, the BJP successfully expanded its social base, attracting upper-caste groups, segments of the middle class, and sections of the female electorate. This paper argues that the BJP's rise was not merely a political realignment, but a fundamental shift that profoundly transformed the ideological landscape of Indian politics. The party's populist mobilization, rooted in Hindu identity, laid the foundation for the politicization of religion and accelerated the broader rightward shift in India's political order. Through this analysis, the study re-examines the BJP's path to power and its profound impact on the trajectory of contemporary Indian politics, uncovering the historical roots of India's current rightward turn.

Keywords

BJP, Hinduism, Populism, Political Mobilization

1. Introduction

Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been in power for ten consecutive years, marking the first time since India's independence that a non-Congress party has held power for three consecutive terms. The BJP's governance has not only reshaped India's political landscape, but has also profoundly altered its social structure and cultural identity. Hindu populism has emerged as a characteristic political feature of the country. Some scholars argue, based on their analysis of the BJP's election manifestos, that the phenomenon of Hindu populism only exists during Modi's tenure and is not prominent in other periods of the party's history. [30] However, from a sociological perspective that views populism

as a political mobilization strategy, completely different conclusions can be drawn. Understanding populism as a mobilization strategy not only explains why the BJP is keen on promoting Hindu communalism but also provides a comprehensive view of how India has transitioned from a secular state to a Hindu nation on a social level.

This article explores the topic through the lens of Hindu populism, aiming to address the following questions by analyzing the mobilization strategies of the BJP: How has the BJP molded Hinduism into a powerful political instrument? What profound impacts has it had on India's political trajectory? By re-examining the BJP's rise through the framework of popu-

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lism, this study offers a deeper understanding of the fluctuating phenomenon of Hindu populism in India, as well as the historical evolution and transformations within the Indian political landscape. It underscores both the significant theoretical and practical implications of this process.

2. Populism as a Political Mobilization Strategy

Sociological research on populism focuses on the pathways through which populist leaders or organizations mobilize political support. In his groundbreaking studies on Latin America, Nicos Mouzelis observes that populism functions as a strategy for connecting political parties with voters by bypassing intermediary organizations or disrupting traditional political structures to forge more direct links with the electorate. Populists advance “anti-establishment” or “anti-system” rhetoric and aim to engage in political organization and communication through direct, people-centered approaches. [24]. This suggests that populists typically establish a unilateral relationship with the masses to gain and maintain power. They excel at utilizing various mobilization tactics, including broadly encouraging individual participation, raising awareness of specific issues, directing collective action, and endorsing popular demands. Such mobilization operates within a comprehensive political agenda that divides society into the “pure people” and the “corrupt elites”, calling for the restoration of popular sovereignty in the name of “the people” [2]. Populist mobilization often aims for sweeping reforms of political institutions to restore “people’s sovereignty”. From an emotional-psychological perspective, populism taps into feelings of injustice, fostering a belief system rooted in the idea that the elites in power intentionally neglect the needs of the people they are meant to represent. [10]

While the mere expression of dissatisfaction or demands by the masses does not constitute genuine politics unless articulated in a politically significant way that sparks the desire for action. This transformation of widespread discontent into populist mobilization cannot occur without the impetus provided by populist organizations and leaders. Therefore, populism does not lie in the actual content of the demands, but rather in the manner of their expression—or more precisely, in the way those demands are constructed. [27] Isolated protest events may lack political significance on their own; it is only when the state fails to address these protests adequately for various reasons that populists find the opportunity to unite dissatisfied groups, forming a common political front through an “equivalence chain” to articulate their demands, thereby reflecting the underlying social divide between “the people” and “the elites”. This aggregative function also illustrates that populism is fundamentally a means of “expressing social dissatisfaction”. It can be seen as a “flexible way to elicit political support”, [20] enabling the recruitment of dissatisfied social groups or individuals under the banner of “the

people,” while portraying the “elites” as unjust perpetrators. Some sociologists suggest that, in addition to unfulfilled material needs, post-materialist values such as religion, democracy, equality, and freedom also play significant roles as mobilizing factors. [25]

How do populists transform the demands of the people into a collective action framework for populist mobilization? The collective action framework aims to trigger a cognitive process that converts discontent into action. Populists carefully select information and imagery to “interpret people’s living conditions, including emotions such as anger and fear, framing them as dissatisfaction with unjust systems or enemies”, [34] thereby encouraging the public to seek change through protest. Populists perceive reality as problematic because the “elites” have usurped “popular sovereignty”. Thus, they argue that the “people” should mobilize to reclaim what they rightfully deserve.

An important dimension of this mobilization model is the resonance of collective identity among movement participants [28]. Constructing collective identity is a key function of social movements, and populists exemplify mobilization under the inclusive identity of “the people”. As Canovan explains, populists employ the broad, carefully crafted concept of “the people” to blur established political divides, using their “chameleonic” rhetorical qualities to forge wide-ranging social alliances [6]. In other words, flexible symbolic labels explain the adaptability of the populist framework across different social and political systems. Populist activists act as “identity entrepreneurs”, harnessing the symbolic power of these labels to align their meanings with strategic needs, simplifying political struggles into clear dichotomies, and maximizing political mobilization on the side of “us”. [11] The collective identity of “the people” becomes a “floating signifier”, [23] shaped by sufficiently creative agents who enable it to take effect.

In summary, populists adhere to a majoritarian perspective, believing that the elites in power should always submit to the primacy of the vast majority, rather than any other source of political legitimacy. They analyze the deep injustices within the current political system and skillfully merge criticism of the existing regime with calls to amplify the voice of the people, thus creating a collective action framework and identity that propels the movement's development. This populist mobilization can have a profound impact on a country’s political processes.

3. Populism and Religious

The significant influence of religion in politics has been recognized and utilized by nationalist or ethnic populists. Yilmaz Ihsan and Nicholas Morieson argue that populism, as a “thin” ideology, fundamentally depends on “thick” ideologies, which enables populism to closely intertwine with religion. [37] This reliance of populism on religion allows populists to turn religion into a tool for seizing and consolidating

power in societies where religion plays a significant role, particularly where it serves as a cultural foundation. Generally, populists often use “religious traditions” as a unifying bond, drawing on the “historical continuity of symbolic systems” rooted in religion, which becomes intertwined with ethnicity and nationality. [29]

In addition, the Manichaeic nature of populism, or its division of the world into good and evil, also draws on religious doctrines. In this context, populism can transform into a process of identity formation, where individuals categorize themselves into two major groups of “good” and “evil” based on religious identity. [37] In summary, religion functions as a tool for populist leaders or parties to reinforce their ideologies and provide a framework for their rhetoric. Religion also serves as a marker of identity, as populists mobilize religious cultural resources to sanctify “the people”, moralize their cause, and represent a Manichaeic dichotomy of “good” and “evil” against the “elite-other” alliance. [1] By creating a discourse of “self-other”, a binary opposition is established between “us” and “them”, as well as “inside” and “outside”.

4. The Populist Mobilization of the BJP

Hindu populism, rooted in Hindu identity, represents a political discourse distinguished by its unique rhetoric and institutional characteristics. It employs a sacred language in its narrative, framing Hinduism as the foundation of national collective identity and the ultimate source of values and goals for nationalism. [14] Critiquing the Indian National Congress’s “pseudo-secularism”, it openly mobilizes the masses through religious themes, with Hindu nationalism serving as both a reference point and the cornerstone of its propaganda, thereby securing widespread public support.

4.1. Criticism of the Congress Party’s Secularism

From its inception, the BJP has criticized the Congress Party’s secular policies, viewing secularism as a byproduct of “vote bank” politics—policies designed to favor minorities for electoral gain. Advani stated, “Nehru’s concept of a secular state is superficial and lacks roots in Indian soil. Indians are deeply religious; both culturally and practically, religion provides the ethical and moral foundation for political life. Nehru’s secular vision misinterprets the essence of Hinduism and the true nature of national identity. As a result, in practical politics, his notion of secularism is primarily anti-Hindu and pro-Muslim, which has greatly harmed India’s national unity”. [4]

In the 1989 elections, the BJP released a 38-page campaign manifesto that criticized the Congress Party’s incompetence and its so-called false secularism. The manifesto asserted, “The BJP is committed to the unity and integrity of India and to uplifting the status of the poor and the oppressed”. It further declared, “Today, India faces an unprecedented crisis. The

national sentiment is not only cynical but increasingly disgusted and angry at the declining public morality of the highest leadership. The tragedy for the people is that this great nation is ruled by a group of incompetent and corrupt individuals who lack commitment to the country, its democratic institutions, and its cultural traditions. There is mounting evidence that those in high office in this country are not only dishonest but also utterly shameless. Yet they continue to govern and attempt to subvert the democratic process through fascist means”. [3]

In addition to criticizing the incompetence and corruption of the Congress Party government, its deliberate manipulation of religion also became a tool for the Bharatiya Janata Party to mobilize the masses. In its manifesto, the BJP fiercely condemned the Congress Party’s religious policies for inciting bloodshed across the country, stating, “From Punjab to Assam, from Kashmir to Sri Lanka, the Rajiv regime is drenched in blood and mud from head to toe. Everything Rajiv Gandhi has touched has ended in bloody chaos”. [3] Building on its criticism of the Congress Party’s political incompetence and “false secularism” driven by political interests, the BJP shifted its focus toward sectarian politics in its mobilization, openly supporting the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s religious demands concerning the Babri Masjid.

4.2. Evoking the Emotions of “Fear” and “Anger” Among Hindus

In the 1980s, two epic works of Indian literature, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were adapted into television series, creating a massive social phenomenon as entire communities gathered to watch. This “epic consciousness”, shaped by both historical tradition and modern reinvention, deeply captivated the public’s awareness during the process of socialization. [16] In these epics, Rama’s victory is portrayed as the triumph of “good over evil”, and the presence of Muslims was seen as filling the role of the adversary that Rama must conquer. The imagined homogeneity, masculinity, solidarity, and aggressiveness of Muslims became the ideal “Other”, filling the gap in the social dichotomy. Meanwhile, the fluidity of identity brought by modernity fostered fears and anxieties about the loss of identity. Muslims, as a solid and unified entity in a symbolic sense, enabled many people to forge a more unified sense of self. Thus, as the external “Other”, Muslims helped Hindus redefine the “We” of their in-group, simplifying India’s complex and unequal social structure into a unified Hindu identity in contrast to the “Other”.

During the 1989 election campaign, the BJP prominently displayed images of Rama, the supreme Hindu deity, on large billboards. This muscular, bow-wielding figure of Rama, reinterpreted by Hindu nationalists, became a symbol of power and strength, embodying the role of the “angry Hindu”. [19] Hindu nationalists had long viewed Hindus as being overly tolerant and passive, and this strong, aggressive de-

piction of Rama symbolized the need for Hindus to adopt a more assertive approach. By equating Rama with Hinduism, Hindu nationalists paved the way for channeling religious devotion toward a distinct group identified as Hindus. [9]

The new image of Rama reflected the belief within Hindu nationalist organizations in the 1980s that Hindus needed to recognize their vulnerability and take active steps to defend their religion. The reinterpretation of the mythological figure of Rama must be understood within this context. This “new Rama” was depicted as a leader of Hinduism, someone with whom Hindus should identify in order to gain strength and courage. In the past, they had often “fled” out of cowardice, but now, with Rama’s guidance, they were encouraged to overcome their inferiority complex. This new image of Rama transformed the meaning of Hinduism. [21] Thus, the reinterpretation of the traditional figure of Rama imbued Hinduism with a new “political meaning”. In fact, the Ayodhya movement marked the rise of a radical spirit of “political devotion”. Compared to the “nationalist devotion” exemplified by the Ekatmata Yatra (Unity March) initiated by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, this shift represented a significant movement from the social sphere to the political domain.

4.3. Organizing Religious Processions

Due to the caste system, the stratification of Indian society is severe. To bridge these divisions and promote unity among Hindus, the BJP utilizes “religious processions” to construct a collective Hindu identity. These processions foster a sense of “indistinguishable identity” among the participating groups. Although each participant may differ significantly from those around them, they can still feel a tangible and direct connection with others engaged in the same ritual. These strengthened connections, both physically and temporally, cultivate a religion-based group identity, which, in turn, triggers an immediate and intense rejection of external groups that may threaten the community’s values. [13] Therefore, while religious processions intended to display power can lead to large-scale communal riots, they also generate momentum for achieving political goals. In the chaotic environment of a religious procession, social structures coalesce into an “indistinguishable unity”. [33] Social members are united by common goals, experiences, and values, and in that moment, differences in identity are blurred, or even disappear. This cohesion, especially in India’s caste-based hierarchical society, helps to bridge divisions caused by caste and establishes a Hindu front that transcends caste differences. [5] Religious processions are among the few occasions when people from different castes gather and participate together. Although these processions are meticulously organized, they create the impression that all participants belong to a relatively homogeneous collective.

At the same time, religious processions that incite community riots can help the BJP cultivate an “identity-based electorate”. The process of unity created by religious proces-

sions, especially radical ones, often provokes aggression and hostility toward heterodox religions, leading to the outbreak of communal riots. These riots polarize the population along identity lines, thus creating a Hindu electoral base for the BJP. This phenomenon was fully verified by the communal riots that erupted around the 1989 elections in India.

The 1989 *Ram Shila Pujans* (Rama stone worship ceremonies), mobilized by Hindu nationalist organizations, were undoubtedly “processions of mobilization and confrontation” [5] and became a catalyst for a wave of riots across India. In the past, communal riots were primarily localized incidents, but with rumors and distorted media coverage of violent events, secondary reactions spread the unrest to larger regions. In 1989, in support of the BJP’s election campaign, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) organized a series of provocative *Ram Shila* processions across India. These events combined fervent faith with militant rhetoric, publicly broadcasting the incendiary speeches of Hindu nationalists and triggering communal riots and violence.

On October 6th, 1989, in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, the procession used a highly provocative slogan: “There are only two places for Muslims: Pakistan or the graveyard”. This led to immediate riots. From September 14th onward, the state experienced 15 conflicts, resulting in 19 deaths, compared to an annual average of just 2 conflicts and 3 deaths. [22] Most of these incidents were incited by the *Ram Shila* religious ceremonies. Additionally, the processions triggered anti-government actions; when Hindu militants faced administrative bans or had their processions obstructed, they resorted to violent confrontations with the police. [24]

Another city with relatively low communal conflict, Indore in Madhya Pradesh, also experienced unprecedented large-scale violence during the *Ram Shila* religious processions. On September 23rd, 1989, a 4-kilometer-long procession, consisting of 25,000 people, led by 50 sword-wielding *akharas* (wrestling groups), chanted traditional Hindu slogans, which Muslims perceived as a provocation. They immediately announced their own procession on October 14th, *Eid Milad*, the Prophet’s birthday. Hindu nationalists responded by calling for a “people’s curfew”. On October 14th, approximately 30,000 Muslims participated in the procession, which soon escalated into riots, resulting around 40 people dead. [12] Additionally, more riots erupted in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Bihar, with the violence in Bhagalpur, Bihar, alone resulting in the deaths of approximately 538 people. [26]

By the end of 1989, the *Ram Shila* processions and the subsequent riots marked the peak of the BJP’s Hindu political mobilization strategy. Through these processions, the BJP strengthened Hindu collective consciousness and pursued the goal of a “Hindu vote bank”, demonstrating that creating a radical “community” capable of inciting violence can attract public support for political purposes. In the 1989 elections, out of the 88 constituencies won by the BJP, 47 were in riot-affected areas, [8] directly confirming that “communal polarization benefits the BJP’s electoral performance”. After

the 1989 elections, the BJP achieved historic gains, becoming the third-largest party in Parliament. Additionally, the large-scale riots triggered by the 1990 Rath Yatra (chariot procession) led by L. K. Advani further expanded the BJP's influence. Christophe Jaffrelot observed that the vulnerability felt by many Hindus "was transformed into anger directed at the political authorities and Muslims". [19] Zoya Hasan wrote that "opposition to the secular state and the unified Hindu society reset the national agenda and became central to the beliefs of many Hindus". [17] This Rath Yatra, which traveled from south to north, was a tremendous success, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of Hindus. It proved to be an effective strategy for strengthening Hindu unity and brought significant political benefits to the BJP. By promoting religious mobilization, Hindu nationalist ideology was reinforced and spread more effectively into remote regions, further extending the BJP's social influence.

5. From the Margins to the Center: BJP's Remarkable Rise

The rise of Hindu populism from the 1980s to the 1990s had a profound impact on Indian politics. First, the BJP leveraged Hindu populist mobilization to unite Hindus, who had been divided by region, caste, and class, into a powerful political force representing Hindu nationalism. Second, although caste-based identity politics had always been a part of Indian politics, the emergence of Hindu sectarian identity politics can be attributed to the BJP's Hindu political mobilization. In its effort to unite all Hindus, the BJP constructed a Hindu coalition from the perspective of "nation-religion", aiming to bridge the divisions among Hindus. The rise of Hindu sectarian identity politics transformed the nature of Indian politics, challenged India's secularism, and provoked social divisions based on religion.

5.1. The BJP Becomes a Key Political Force Uniting Hindus

In India, although Hindus make up about 80% of the population, before the rise of the BJP, they were relatively weak both socially and politically, with limited ability to mobilize large numbers of followers. This was mainly because, unlike other monotheistic religions, Hinduism lacks a unified leadership system or a set of doctrines. It is a highly diverse and decentralized religious system, without a clear religious authority or universally recognized fundamental principles, making its practice individualistic and private in nature. There is no unified religious ritual or collective activity, which makes it difficult to gather followers for large-scale religious mobilization or political organizations. Furthermore, ideological differences within the Hindu community, stemming from regional, linguistic, and caste factors, have led to different identities. These differing identities create political

uncertainty and contradictions, hindering internal unity and cohesion among Hindus. These challenges have been a core obstacle to collective action. For the BJP, the central challenge has been how to mobilize individuals within such a large but fragmented religious group to support a party focused on Hindu interests and well-being. The vast size of the Hindu population and the divisions within it weaken collective solidarity. To achieve unified collective action in such a complex society, a common goal is necessary to coordinate and integrate different demands, overcoming competitive support among internal groups and promoting unity and action.

The logic of this collective action led BJP elites to realize that only by linking Hinduism to national issues and constructing a threatening external "Other" could Hindus be united under the banner of Hinduism. This would be the most effective way to overcome internal Hindu divisions, fill the leadership vacuum, and establish a Hindu "vote bank". [32] From the 1980s to the 1990s, the political mobilization surrounding the issue of Ayodhya truly brought the BJP into the public eye. Initially, as a party of upper-caste urban elites, the BJP had a weak base in rural areas. However, the Ayodhya movement allowed the BJP to penetrate rural villages, especially in northern India, more effectively than ever before. [19] Many villagers learned about the "martyrs of Ayodhya" through the Indian media and expressed their support for the BJP's movement in Ayodhya. However, they made it clear that they would withdraw their support if the party betrayed this cause. [19] The religious and nationalistic sentiments surrounding Ayodhya became the most direct link connecting Hindus with the BJP.

Furthermore, Hindu political mobilization attracted unprecedented support from Hindu women. According to the VHP, 2,000 women participated in the temple foundation-laying ceremony in October 1990, passionately advocating for the construction of a Rama temple in Ayodhya. [19] Of course, we must acknowledge that religious nationalism and even deep religious belief were not the sole forces driving group mobilization. The reinterpretation of religion to safeguard personal interests also played an important role. As Savarkar suggested, the religious movement helped middle-class women, a specific and socially significant group, emerge from domestic life, reclaim public space, gain political identity, and engage in serious reflection. [31] Hindu nationalists believed that the ideal woman should possess the spirit and radiance of motherhood while also being firmly dedicated to the cause. They recognized the public role of women. [19] The BJP leadership's focus on women, and the elevation of some active female activists to heroic status, earned the respect and support of women in a traditionally male-dominated society.

Finally, the Ayodhya movement helped the BJP attract a large number of Indian youth, particularly unemployed urban youth. Through the movement, they expressed their loyalty to Rama, found a hero to emulate, and regained their lost sense of self-worth. The movement initiated by the BJP in Rama's

name allowed them to connect with an idealized, masculine, and moral figure, giving their lives meaning to some extent. The *Bajrang Dal*, a right-wing Hindu nationalist youth organization founded in 1984 as the youth wing of the BJP, emerged directly from these frustrated young people. Most of them were poorly educated, did not speak English, worked in jobs they found unsatisfactory, or were unemployed. Frustration was their common bond. Many of them were captivated by heroic films because they needed to escape their dire situations and sought positive identity by associating with and imitating fictional characters. [18] Some of them longed to “become righteous heroes, like those in Mumbai films, who fight evil and uphold justice”. [18] They were eager to confront Muslims to defend their status and prove their strength. They also held many negative stereotypes about Muslims, such as the belief that polygamy among Muslims led to excessive population growth or that Muslims sympathized with Pakistan. Going to Ayodhya was seen as a way to test themselves both physically and morally in the name of the sacred cause of Rama.

Religious political mobilization, based on shared faith, united these frustrated Hindu groups by providing them with an attractive cause and a common identity. This process maximized the unity of marginalized groups and laid the social foundation for the growth of the BJP. Between 1989 and 1992, India witnessed a significant rise in the BJP’s influence. In the 1989 Indian general election, the BJP won 85 seats in the Lok Sabha. By 1991, the party had further improved its standing, winning 120 seats, and its vote share rose from 11.3% to 20.8%. The BJP’s role in Indian politics became increasingly undeniable, making it one of the major forces shaping the Indian political landscape.

5.2. The Rise of Hindu Identity Politics

When the BJP used Hinduism to mobilize the masses, it signaled the rise of Hindu identity politics. In India, about 80% of the population practices Hinduism. To Indians, Hinduism is not only a religion but also a cultural and spiritual force that permeates their lives and society. During the political turmoil and economic difficulties of the 1980s, the public’s concerns about political instability and uncertainty intensified. The BJP capitalized on these fears and, through Hindu mobilization, reinforced the social identity of the Hindu community.

At the same time, the Congress government’s weakness and inconsistency in upholding secularism further accelerated the rise of Hindu identity politics. First, the Congress government’s serious failures in governance during communal riots provoked attacks from multiple political groups, including the BJP, and led to public disappointment and dissatisfaction with Congress rule. When the BJP and its Sponsoring Organization-RSS repeatedly incited riots between Hindus and Muslims in much of northern India, the Congress government took no measures to protect the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya from being destroyed. Whether Congress deliber-

ately shirked responsibility, fell into paralysis, or was itself communalized, its inaction during the riots displayed extreme weakness. The public’s resentment toward the Congress Party has been steadily growing.

Second, the BJP accused Congress of practicing “pseudo-secularism”. From the BJP’s perspective, Congress’s political decisions were driven by short-term gains rather than being rooted in stable principles or long-term policies. This opportunistic approach, according to the BJP, weakened India’s political system. Indira Gandhi, for instance, consistently sought to consolidate her leadership by centralizing power in the executive branch, which eroded the strength of other political institutions. When her support began to wane, she appealed to the Hindu majority for backing. Similarly, Rajiv Gandhi, in an effort to appease the Muslim community, overturned a court ruling in the Shah Bano case and passed legislation that deprived Muslim women of their right to alimony under secular law. The Shah Bano case became a symbol of Congress’s willingness to compromise to secure Muslim support. This erosion of Congress’s secular authority created a political opening for the BJP, which quickly capitalized on rising majoritarian sentiment. The BJP positioned itself as the legitimate representative of Hindu interests, rallying public opposition against Congress for undermining Hindu rights.

In the elections between 1989 and 1991, the BJP continued to harness the momentum of the Hindu movement and anti-Congress political mobilization, securing victories in regional elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. Identity politics became a crucial tool for the BJP to attract voters, and the rise of Hindu identity politics strengthened the party’s ability to reshape India’s political discourse. Through anti-secular rhetoric, protests outside of parliament, and the manipulation of sensitive religious and cultural issues, India’s political landscape underwent significant transformation. Even left-wing intellectuals criticized secularism for lacking an organic foundation in a religious society like India, suggesting that the ethics of religious tolerance might be more suitable than secularism. Congress, despite its secular claims, also began to cater to anti-secular religious sentiments in an effort to win public favor. [15] Although the constitutional framework of secularism remains intact, the challenges and shocks from Hindu identity politics have left India’s secularism in a state of suspension, which may endure for a prolonged period.

At the same time, the BJP capitalized on public disillusionment with Congress, seizing the opportunity to reshape national politics and ideology. The party incorporated the call for “value-based politics” into its platform, convincing the public that the rampant corruption within Congress stemmed from the government’s lack of ethical and moral foundations. The procedural justice and rule-based constraints of a secular, rational government, it argued, could not ensure good governance. To legitimize the merging of religion and politics, the BJP linked the concept of value-based politics with an-

ti-corruption, portraying religious values as a panacea for India's political ailments and infusing Indian politics with a powerful—and potentially dangerous—religious dimension.

Although this religion-infused identity politics violated the political principles of “centrism”, “socialism”, and “secularism” established since India's founding. In the 1996 general elections, the BJP emerged as the largest party in Parliament, leading to Atal Bihari Vajpayee's appointment to form the government. The BJP's rise was attributed to the success of its populist mobilization strategies, as well as the failure of most other political parties' agendas, which were too narrow to address the anxiety, fear, and confusion felt by citizens amid political and economic changes. The BJP provided these citizens with an outlet to express their dissatisfaction with the state, linking anti-government sentiment with anti-Congress sentiment and mobilizing groups disenfranchised by the political system, offering them a viable alternative to Congress rule.

In summary, the BJP led groups that felt marginalized by the system and, with the help of the *Sangh Parivar*, created a platform encouraging self-expression for different social groups. For many Hindu women, the BJP provided an opportunity to be politically active with the support of their families. For lower-caste and lower-class individuals, riots became an effective means of venting their frustrations and anger. For upper-caste BJP supporters, Hindu nationalism represented a rejection of the growing political power of backward castes. By making the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya a symbol of “Hindu victimhood”, the BJP legitimized the desires and grievances of groups marginalized by caste, class, or gender, thereby garnering public support.

5.3. The Shift in India's Political Landscape and Political Direction

The shift in voters' political values, driven by religious mobilization, transformed India's political landscape and resulted in a rightward shift in its political direction. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, through its Hindu mobilization efforts, the BJP emerged as the third major force in India's party system, competing with the Indian National Congress (Congress Party) and other political parties. Some scholars refer to the elections of 1989, 1991, 1996, and 1998 as the “era of repositioning elections”. [32] The shift in voters' political values also led to changes in their loyalty to particular political parties, influencing their voting behavior. Since India's independence, the Congress Party's political values—especially its commitment to secularism—had largely shaped the nation. However, as the Congress Party, the custodian of these values, declined, the ideological influence of these principles weakened as well. This decline created an ideological vacuum, offering an opportunity to redefine the public's political values. The BJP's success demonstrated that a mobilization campaign centered on forging a collective identity could reshape public political values.

The shift in voters' political values became especially evident in electoral politics, where political inclinations and voting behavior underwent a sustained and fundamental change. Voters were no longer loyal to a single political party but instead chose to support groups that aligned with their values and represented their interests. This transformation not only fragmented the voter base of dominant political parties but also enabled the rise of parties representing marginalized and disadvantaged groups. The change in Indian voters' political values contributed to the rise of the BJP, challenging the secular nationalism that had shaped Indian politics since the independence movement and the early years of independence. This shift signaled that Indian voters were forging a new political identity distinct from the past.

In the 1991 election, the BJP openly leveraged the sensitive issue of the Babri Mosque to present itself as a pro-Hindu party to voters. Rather than alienating the electorate, this strategy helped the BJP secure its position as the second-largest party in the Lok Sabha. The election results demonstrated that Indian voters were shifting toward supporting a nationalist party rooted in Hinduism, signaling a rightward shift in India's political trajectory. The 1998 election results further underscored this trend. For a long time, the BJP's influence had been concentrated in northern India, where Hindu culture was deeply entrenched, with limited sway in the southern regions. This was largely due to the southern regions being less influenced by traditional Hindu culture and maintaining relatively harmonious relations with the Muslim population, limiting the BJP's reach in those areas. However, in the 1998 election, the BJP made significant gains in both the southern and eastern regions, with its vote share increasing by 22 percentage points compared to 1996, from 4% to 26%. [35] The party not only secured more than half of the upper-caste vote but also won the largest share of Hindu votes in rural areas (35%), urban areas (41%), and among all educational groups. [36] These results indicated that the BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology was resonating with a broader electorate, and the party was being accepted as a legitimate alternative to the Congress Party.

The rise of the BJP transformed India's political landscape and shifted the country's political direction. In the early years of independence, economic development was the central issue in elections, even amid ideological conflicts between different factions. Opposition parties primarily focused on economic issues, corruption, and other practical concerns directly affecting people's livelihoods. Mainstream parties viewed sectarianism and appeals to primordial social ties as taboo in politics, recognizing that exploiting them for political gain could deepen social divisions. [7] However, the rise of the BJP altered the secular trajectory of Indian politics. When the BJP struggled to gain public support on common issues such as the economy and governance, it often resorted to unconventional tactics to win elections. The party employed strategies that tapped into the emotions of ordinary citizens—stirring up sentiments on emotional and sensitive issues to create a sense of connection with the party. This approach transformed pol-

itics into an emotional spectacle, achieving outcomes that traditional political mobilization tools could not. Through these unconventional methods, the BJP turned controversial social topics into political issues, arousing public emotions and reaping electoral gains.

6. Conclusion

Populism, as a strategy for organizing and mobilizing, excels at leveraging specific issues to channel public discontent and guide collective action. In countries where religion holds a significant social position, populists often closely intertwine religion with politics, turning it into a tool for seizing and consolidating power. This has been particularly evident in the rise of the BJP. In the 1980s, the rise of Hinduism as a tool for populism mobilization involved the BJP's reimagining of the state and society, as well as increased elite and public skepticism toward the secular democratic nature of India. The rise of the BJP, in a sense, was a victory of negative conditions. Its success was built on the decline of the Congress Party, the collapse of secularism, and the rise of caste politics, all of which created a political and ideological vacuum. By utilizing religious political mobilization, the BJP transformed from a regional party into a national force capable of challenging the Congress Party.

The rise of the BJP has had a profound impact on Indian politics. First, through its Hindu political mobilization, the BJP bridged the divisions among Hindus caused by regional, caste, and class differences, representing the rise of Hindu nationalism as a political force. Second, identity politics has long been a part of Indian politics due to the country's social and cultural diversity. Many regional caste-based parties emerged from caste identity politics. However, the rise of Hindu sectarian identity politics can be attributed to Hindu political mobilization. To unite all Hindus, the BJP constructed a Hindu alliance from a national-religious perspective, attempting to consolidate Hindus into a homogeneous Hindu society. However, the rise of Hindu sectarian identity politics changed the nature of Indian politics, challenged secularism, and provoked social divisions and national fragmentation.

Lastly, through Hindu populism mobilization, the BJP altered traditional political values and identities among Indian voters, thereby influencing their voting choices. The phenomenon of "electoral realignment" and subsequent power shifts became increasingly common, deeply impacting the development of Indian politics. This shift laid the groundwork for the later strong rise of Modi and the BJP, leaving traces that can be traced back to these earlier changes.

Abbreviations

BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

Author Contributions

Tian Mi is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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