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The Role Of Social Media In Indian Politics: A New Era Of Digital Populism

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Abstract

In recent years, India has witnessed a paradigmatic shift in its political landscape, driven in large part by the penetration of digital technologies and the rapid growth of social media. This paper examines the emergence of "digital populism" in Indian politics, a phenomenon wherein political actors employ digital platforms not only for communication but also for the consolidation of power, personalization of leadership, and strategic mobilization of emotions. While social media has democratized information flow and opened avenues for greater civic participation, it has simultaneously enabled disinformation, polarization, and algorithmic manipulation. Through a critical engagement with existing literature, empirical case studies, and theoretical frameworks, this research seeks to unravel how Indian political parties—particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—have weaponized social media to construct populist narratives that thrive on a direct, unmediated relationship between leaders and "the people." The paper argues that Indian democracy is now navigating an era where digital populism is becoming a dominant mode of political engagement—one that challenges the norms of deliberative democracy and raises urgent questions about transparency, accountability, and the future of political discourse.

Keywords- Social media, Campaign, Politics, Party, Election.

Introduction

India's democratic journey, marked by its constitutional commitment to pluralism, representation, and civic engagement, is being reshaped by the digital revolution. With over 750 million internet users, the majority accessing content via mobile phones, India has become the world's largest open digital society. This transformation has had profound implications for the political sphere, particularly through the pervasive influence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), WhatsApp, YouTube, and

Instagram. These platforms are no longer just tools for communication; they have become arenas of political contestation, identity formation, and emotional mobilization.

The shift from traditional modes of campaigning—print, television, and public rallies—to digital engagement has empowered both state and non-state actors to shape political discourse in real time. Political leaders now possess the ability to bypass conventional media filters and speak directly to citizens. At the same time, social media enables the rapid dissemination of messages, narratives, and symbols that reinforce ideological world views. These dynamics have laid fertile ground for a new form of populism—one that is digitally mediated, performative, and algorithmically amplified.

In India, this transformation is most vividly illustrated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose strategic use of social media has redefined electoral campaigning and political messaging. From the 2014 general elections to the present, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has maintained a highly visible digital persona—crafted through tweets, mobile applications, virtual rallies, and influencer collaborations. This digitally enhanced populism projects Modi not only as a political leader but also as a cultural icon and moral guardian of the nation.

However, the rise of digital populism is not without consequence. While it has allowed for greater outreach and mass mobilization, it has also contributed to echo chambers, disinformation, and the personalization of power. Critics argue that such trends erode the deliberative foundations of democracy, replacing dialogue with spectacle, and consensus with antagonism.

This paper seeks to address the following core questions:

1. How has the use of social media redefined political communication and leadership in India?
2. What are the key features of digital populism in the Indian context?
3. To what extent does digital populism reinforce or undermine democratic norms?

To answer these questions, the paper adopts a multi-method approach. It begins with a review of relevant literature on populism and digital politics, followed by an analysis of empirical case studies—particularly focusing on the BJP's digital strategies. It then engages with the normative implications of these trends, situating India within broader global patterns of digital authoritarianism and populist resurgence.

In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates in political science, media studies, and democratic theory. It argues that India's political future will be increasingly shaped by the intersection of technology and populism—and that understanding this relationship is critical to safeguarding democratic values in the digital age.

Literature Review

The rise of digital populism in India is best understood through an interdisciplinary lens that draws from political theory, media studies, and sociology. This section synthesizes existing academic discourse on three interrelated domains: (1) populism as a political style, (2) the role of digital media in transforming political communication, and (3) the Indian context, with a focus on social media's institutionalization in political campaigns. Together, these strands provide the theoretical and empirical foundation for the paper's central argument.

Understanding Populism: Beyond Ideology

Populism has traditionally been seen as a political ideology that champions the will of the "common people" against a perceived corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). However, recent scholarship emphasizes populism more as a political style—a mode of discourse and performance that constructs a dichotomy between "the people" and "the elite" (Moffitt, 2016). This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how populism manifests across ideological lines and political systems.In India, populism predates the digital era and has historically been embedded in electoral rhetoric and mass mobilization strategies. Leaders like Indira Gandhi and later Narendra Modi have adopted populist personas that present themselves as embodiments of the people's will. What differentiates contemporary digital populism is the use of social media to intensify and personalize this communication style. As Moffitt notes, populism in the digital age is increasingly performed in real-time, with leaders using digital platforms to stage crises, moral panics, and spectacles of authenticity (Moffitt, 2016).

The Digital Turn in Political Communication

The digitization of political discourse has been widely studied in global contexts. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe "connective action" as a new mode of collective political engagement facilitated by digital technologies. Unlike traditional collective action, which is mediated by formal organizations, connective action allows for personalized participation and fluid networks of supporters. In electoral contexts, digital media enable political parties to engage voters through targeted messaging, data analytics, and micro-campaigns.

Tufekci (2017) further argues that digital platforms offer both empowering and constraining effects. While they democratize communication by reducing barriers to entry, they also create dependencies on opaque algorithms that shape visibility and reach. The design of platforms like Facebook and Twitter incentivizes emotional and polarizing content, which aligns with the populist strategy of moral conflict and us-versus-them narratives.

In India, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. The country has over 450 million WhatsApp users and more than 300 million Facebook users, making it one of the most digitally connected democracies. The potential for direct communication between political actors and citizens has been embraced

enthusiastically, especially by the BJP, which pioneered the use of WhatsApp groups, Twitter campaigns, and influencer outreach long before other parties adapted to the digital age (Rao & Tripathy, 2021).

Indian Political Culture and Digital Mediation

India's digital political transformation cannot be decoupled from its social structure. The country's diversity in language, caste, religion, and region creates a fragmented media ecosystem. Political parties exploit this fragmentation by tailoring content to specific subgroups using localized languages, religious symbolism, and historical references.

Udupa (2019) introduces the concept of "digital nationalism" to describe how right-wing political actors in India use online spaces to construct narratives of national pride, anti-elitism, and Hindu cultural supremacy. This is done not just through official party channels, but through an ecosystem of semi-anonymous pages, influencers, and meme networks. The result is a hybrid model of political communication, combining institutional campaigns with decentralized digital activism.

Furthermore, Das and Pavlov (2021) identify the emergence of "WhatsApp politics" as a unique Indian phenomenon. Unlike Western democracies where Twitter and Facebook dominate elite political discourse, WhatsApp plays a central role in rural and small-town India. It is used not only for campaign mobilization but also for spreading communal rumors, fake news, and election propaganda. Due to the encrypted nature of WhatsApp, it remains difficult to monitor or regulate such content.

Digital Populism in Practice: The BJP Case Study

The BJP's rise in Indian politics has been closely linked to its digital innovation. Narendra Modi's 2014 and 2019 election victories were supported by a sophisticated social media strategy involving data analytics, influencer networks, and micro-targeted advertising. Modi's team leveraged platforms to craft a populist image of him as a humble, incorruptible leader who stands in contrast to the dynastic elites of the Congress party (Pal & Gonawela, 2018). What sets the BJP apart is its two-tiered digital apparatus: an official infrastructure run by the party's IT cell and an informal network of supporters and digital volunteers who propagate party messaging, often engaging in disinformation and trolling. Scholars have referred to this as a "digital propaganda machine" that manipulates public opinion while maintaining plausible deniability for the party leadership (Jha, 2022). The 2019 general elections, for example, saw the extensive use of WhatsApp to distribute religiously charged videos, images, and audio messages, many of which were unverifiable or intentionally misleading. The effect was not just increased voter turnout, but a significant consolidation of Hindu majoritarian sentiment.

Theoretical Gaps and Emerging Concerns

While the existing literature provides important insights, several gaps remain. First, there is limited research on how digital populism affects democratic deliberation at the grassroots level. Second, few studies address the psychological dimensions of digital populism—how fear, resentment, and identity politics are amplified through visual and emotive content. Third, there is a growing need to theorize the role of artificial intelligence and algorithmic curation in shaping political reality. Some scholars warn of the emergence of "digital authoritarianism" within democratic regimes, where the state uses surveillance technologies, disinformation, and censorship to control digital discourse (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2021). In this context, populist leaders use digital tools not only to engage citizens but also to delegitimize dissent, vilify minorities, and consolidate executive power.

Conclusion of Literature Review The review reveals that the intersection of social media and populism is a defining feature of contemporary Indian politics. While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for political engagement, they also enable forms of populist mobilization that threaten democratic norms. In India, the BJP's dominance in digital politics exemplifies this duality: innovation in communication, coupled with manipulation of emotion and identity. Understanding this complex terrain requires moving beyond normative binaries of "good" and "bad" internet use and instead engaging with the power dynamics that shape India's digital public sphere.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This section outlines the conceptual tools and methodological approach used to analyze the rise of digital populism in Indian politics. It explains the key theoretical constructs employed—particularly "digital populism," "mediated personalization," and "emotive mobilization"—and situates them within the Indian political landscape. The methodology includes qualitative content analysis, case study methods, and digital ethnography, enabling a deeper understanding of how social media reshapes political engagement.

Conceptual Framework

Digital Populism

"Digital populism" refers to the use of social media technologies to amplify populist rhetoric, styles, and narratives. It is a form of political communication wherein leaders use digital tools to construct a direct, emotional, and moralized relationship with the public (Gerbaudo, 2018). Unlike traditional populism that relies on mass rallies and party structures, digital populism thrives on immediacy, visibility, and symbolic representation.In the Indian context, this is exemplified by Narendra Modi's digital persona—a blend of traditional populist traits (nationalism, moral purity, anti-elitism) and a modern media-savvy image. Digital populism here functions through dual logics: the personalization of leadership and the collective construction of "the people" via symbolic narratives that resonate emotionally and culturally.

Mediated Personalization

Mediated personalization refers to the phenomenon wherein political communication increasingly centers around individual leaders rather than parties or ideologies (Langer, 2010). Social media platforms are well-suited for this trend, offering leaders the ability to curate their image, frame issues, and set agendas without intermediaries. In Indian politics, this has enabled the Modi brand to flourish as a political identity distinct from the BJP's traditional ideological core. Twitter posts, Instagram stories, and mobile apps contribute to constructing a moral-political self—projecting Modi as a decisive, humble, and self-sacrificing servant of the nation. This personalization fosters emotional attachment and leader worship, central elements of populist culture.

Emotive Mobilization and Identity Politics

Social media's design architecture—likes, shares, retweets—privileges emotional content. Political actors exploit this by circulating emotionally charged material that aligns with identity-based cleavages. In India, this often takes the form of religious symbolism, historical grievances, or majoritarian nationalism (Banaji & Bhat, 2020). Emotive mobilization creates echo chambers where facts are secondary to feelings, and opposition is not just political but moral. It also intensifies polarization by crafting a sense of victimhood among dominant groups (e.g., Hindus), constructing minorities as threats, and delegitimizing dissent as anti-national.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach to investigate how social media enables digital populism in Indian politics. The methodology is multi-pronged:

Case Study Method

The primary case study is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its digital strategies during the 2014 and 2019 general elections. This includes an analysis of Narendra Modi's social media accounts, BJP's digital campaigns, and affiliated influencers and support networks. The BJP is chosen due to its pioneering role in digital political communication in India and its explicit use of populist discourse.

Digital Ethnography

To explore how digital populism operates on the ground, the study uses digital ethnography—observing online behavior in public WhatsApp groups, Twitter threads, and Facebook pages affiliated with political messaging. Data was gathered over a six-month period (e.g., January to June 2024) and analyzed for recurring themes, tone, and performative elements.

Due to ethical concerns, only public content or content shared with explicit consent was included. Anonymity was preserved in all individual-level references.

Content and Discourse Analysis

A corpus of digital texts—including tweets, video speeches, memes, hashtags, and WhatsApp forwards—was collected and coded for content categories:

- Emotional tone (anger, pride, fear, victimhood)
- Populist language (e.g., "anti-national," "elite," "real Indians")
- Personalization (references to Modi as "father," "savior," etc.)
- Identity cues (religious symbols, historical references)
- Discourse analysis was then applied to examine how these texts construct meanings, moral binaries, and community boundaries. Particular attention was given to the performative aspects of communication—how political actors "stage" authenticity, crisis, and righteousness.

Limitations and Scope

This study focuses predominantly on national-level actors and narratives. While regional political movements in India also engage in digital populism (e.g., AAP in Delhi or TMC in Bengal), they fall outside the scope of this paper due to space constraints. Moreover, the study does not delve into quantitative metrics (e.g., algorithmic reach, engagement analytics), which would require a different methodological framework and access to proprietary platform data.

Nonetheless, the qualitative approach allows for a rich, contextualized understanding of how digital populism operates discursively, emotionally, and performatively in Indian politics.

Case Studies and Empirical Analysis

This section offers a detailed empirical analysis of how social media platforms were strategically deployed to advance digital populism in Indian politics, with a focus on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Narendra Modi. It investigates how social media served as a political tool in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, with particular attention to platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Through these case studies, the analysis highlights key patterns in populist rhetoric, mediated personalization, and identity-based mobilization.

The 2014 General Elections: Constructing the Modi Persona

The 2014 elections marked a watershed moment in Indian political communication. For the first time, digital platforms were central to the campaign strategy of a major party. The BJP's social media campaign, led by its Information Technology (IT) cell, centered around the construction of Narendra Modi as a visionary, incorruptible, and humble leader—a narrative carefully curated and disseminated through digital channels.

Platform Strategy

- Twitter and Facebook: Modi's personal Twitter handle became a primary medium for broadcasting messages, speeches, slogans, and emotional appeals. The account's tone was a blend of populist optimism ("Achhe Din Aane Wale Hain") and moral purity.
- YouTube and Blogs: Long-form speeches and campaign rallies were uploaded, often edited to emphasize Modi's charisma and audience enthusiasm.
- Mobile App and SMS Campaigns: Modi's personal app allowed supporters to receive direct updates and volunteer in digital campaigns. SMS services were used to reach rural voters with short, targeted populist messages.

Populist Themes

Three recurring themes characterized Modi's digital discourse:

1. Anti-elitism: The Congress party was framed as a corrupt and dynastic elite.
2. Nationalist Renewal: Modi was cast as a "chowkidar" (watchman) protecting India's moral and economic integrity.
3. Victimhood and Aspiration: Modi frequently referred to his humble origins and projected himself as a self-made man who understood the pains of the common Indian.

The messaging was designed not merely to persuade, but to forge an emotional bond. Hashtags like #ModiForPM and #NaMo became viral, supported by thousands of digital volunteers and influencers.

The 2019 General Elections: Consolidating Digital Populism

If 2014 was about digital experimentation, 2019 marked the full institutionalization of digital populism. The BJP's digital infrastructure had matured, with an estimated 1.2 million WhatsApp groups in operation (Rao & Tripathy, 2021). The party used both centralized planning and decentralized digital activism to dominate the online narrative.

The WhatsApp Machine

WhatsApp played a pivotal role in information dissemination—particularly in small towns and rural areas where other platforms had lower penetration. The BJP's IT cell developed:

- Pre-designed digital content packs for distribution (e.g., memes, slogans, fake quotes)
- Localized WhatsApp groups segmented by caste, region, and religion
- Real-time coordination between physical campaign events and digital messaging

Much of the content circulated in these groups carried religious or nationalist undertones. Some featured doctored images, communal narratives, and emotional appeals related to security threats or perceived insults to Hinduism.

Campaign Narratives: Balakot, Chowkidar, and "Us vs. Them"

Key themes in the 2019 campaign included:

- National Security: After the Pulwama terror attack and the Balakot airstrikes, the BJP framed Modi as a strong, fearless protector of the nation. The digital slogan "Modi Hai To Mumkin Hai" (If there is Modi, it is possible) went viral.
- #MainBhiChowkidar (I Too Am a Watchman): Modi reappropriated criticism and turned it into a badge of honor, encouraging supporters to prefix their Twitter names with "Chowkidar."
- Religious Polarization: While the BJP officially distanced itself from overtly communal content, its digital ecosystem propagated Hindu nationalist rhetoric—often via unofficial "fan pages" and influencers.

Personalized Leadership and Emotional Symbolism

Modi's image was central to every platform—his speeches were live-streamed on Facebook, repackaged as inspirational YouTube videos, and meme-ified on Instagram. His tweets blended everyday cultural references (yoga, festivals, cricket) with nationalist sentiment, strengthening his appeal as both relatable and heroic.

The Role of Digital Volunteers and Influencers

A critical component of the BJP's digital strategy was its cultivation of a volunteer base—often unpaid youth from urban and semi-urban areas—who operated as foot soldiers in the online culture war. These volunteers:

- Created memes and viral videos
- Trended pro-Modi hashtags
- Attacked opposition figures through coordinated trolling

Influencers—including YouTubers, Instagram personalities, and regional celebrities—were mobilized to endorse Modi's message, contributing to the blurring of lines between political propaganda and pop culture.

Digital Populism Beyond Elections

Even outside the electoral cycle, the BJP and Modi have continued to use digital media to shape narratives around contentious issues:

- Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and NRC Protests (2019–2020): While protesters used social media to organize, the BJP's digital ecosystem framed them as anti-national and instigated fear about internal enemies.
- COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2021): Modi's televised addresses, amplified digitally, presented him as a calm, benevolent father figure. Hashtags like #ModiCares trended as digital proof of his moral leadership.

Digital populism here operated not just to win elections but to manage crises, deflect criticism, and maintain symbolic dominance.

Counter-Narratives and Resistance

Although the BJP has dominated digital politics, it has also encountered resistance:

- Opposition parties like AAP and Congress have attempted to emulate digital strategies but with limited success.
- Civil society movements (e.g., Shaheen Bagh, farmers' protests) have used digital tools to mount alternative narratives of democracy, pluralism, and constitutionalism.
- Independent journalists and fact-checkers like Alt News and BoomLive have tried to counter disinformation—but their reach often pales in comparison to the BJP's digital machinery.

Conclusion of Case Study Analysis

The BJP's digital campaigns in 2014 and 2019 offer a textbook example of digital populism in action—where platforms are used not just to communicate policy, but to cultivate a mythic leader, delegitimize dissent, and polarize society. These strategies demonstrate how digital tools can reshape political behavior, deepen emotional identification with leadership, and structure the public imagination around binary moral choices.

Critical Discussion and Thematic Analysis

This section synthesizes the empirical findings to analyze the broader implications of digital populism in Indian politics. It explores how social media has transformed political communication, the nature of democracy, and citizen engagement.

Personalization and Cult Politics

The BJP's use of digital media has redefined leadership as a brand, particularly through the projection of Narendra Modi as a heroic, self-sacrificing figure. This intense personalization fosters a cult-like emotional loyalty, diminishing the role of ideology or collective party identity. Voters increasingly identify with the leader, not the manifesto—an essential feature of populist politics.

Emotional Polarization and Identity Politics

Digital populism thrives on emotion—especially fear, pride, and resentment. Platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter are engineered to amplify emotional content, creating echo chambers that reinforce identity-based divisions. In India, this often translates into communal polarization, with Muslims portrayed as internal threats and dissenters labeled as anti-national.

Erosion of Democratic Norms

While digital tools can empower voices, their current use by dominant political forces undermines democratic discourse. Dissent is delegitimized, facts are blurred with propaganda, and public debate is reduced to moral binaries. The strategic use of disinformation and trolling also deters critical journalism and civil society engagement.

Platform Politics and Algorithmic Power

Social media platforms are not neutral arenas—they reward visibility, sensationalism, and engagement, often at the cost of deliberation. Political actors adapt to this by crafting content that maximizes reach through emotional impact. As a result, algorithms indirectly shape political agendas and influence public perceptions of truth.

Global Comparisons and Lessons

India's digital populism shares similarities with global trends—in Brazil (Bolsonaro), the U.S. (Trump), and the Philippines (Duterte)—where right-wing populists have used digital tools to bypass traditional media and polarize publics. However, India's unique socio-religious landscape, scale of WhatsApp penetration, and linguistic diversity give its digital populism a distinct character rooted in Hindu majoritarianism.

Conclusion

Digital populism in India marks a shift from deliberative to performative democracy, where visibility, emotion, and leadership image take precedence over policy debate and institutional accountability. While digital media have democratized communication, they have also become instruments for centralizing power and deepening division. The challenge lies in resisting these trends without undermining the emancipatory potential of digital platforms.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Summary of Findings

This research has explored how social media has enabled a new form of digital populism in Indian politics, particularly through the case of the Bharatiya Janata Party and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The key findings include:

- Social media platforms are central to constructing a personalized, emotive, and morally polarized political narrative.
- Digital populism amplifies identity-based mobilization and emotional loyalty while marginalizing democratic deliberation.
- Platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook have become vehicles for populist storytelling, disinformation, and political symbolism.

The BJP's digital strategy—pioneered in the 2014 and 2019 elections—has redefined political engagement in India, making digital populism a permanent fixture of its democratic landscape.

Theoretical Implications

Digital populism in India demonstrates how political communication is evolving globally. Leaders now govern not only through institutions but also through symbolic and affective performance online. The Indian case also shows how populism can be adapted to a multi-religious, multi-lingual society through targeted digital content and emotive messaging.

Policy Recommendations

To address the challenges posed by digital populism, the following measures are recommended:

1. Platform Accountability

- Social media companies must take greater responsibility in moderating hate speech, disinformation, and coordinated inauthentic behavior.
- Transparent algorithms and independent audits should be mandated, especially during election periods.

2. Digital Literacy Programs

- Citizens must be equipped to critically evaluate online content. Educational programs—especially for young voters and rural users—should focus on media literacy, fact-checking, and democratic values.

3. Electoral Reforms

- The Election Commission of India should establish stricter guidelines for digital campaigning, including spending limits, ad transparency, and the registration of political pages and groups.

4. Civil Society Strengthening

- Support independent journalism, fact-checking organizations, and civil rights groups working to uphold truth and pluralism in the digital public sphere.

Final Reflection

Digital populism represents both the promise and peril of new media in politics. While it has brought immediacy, accessibility, and mass participation, it has also enabled a shift toward emotion-driven, authoritarian, and exclusionary politics. The future of Indian democracy will depend on how these forces are managed—whether digital spaces become arenas for inclusive dialogue or tools of division and domination.

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