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Populism and the Politics of Belonging: A Study of Symbolism and Identity in Regional India

Showkat Ahmad Dar[1], Aadil Ahmad Shairgojri[2], Peer Amir Ahmad[3]
[1] Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Public Administration, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamilnadu, India
[2] Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamilnadu, India
[3] Lecturer of Political Science, Govt. Degree College Ramban, Jammu and Kashmir, India

*** Corresponding Author:**
Showkat Ahmad Dar
darshowkat@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the complex interplay between identity politics and populism across Indian states, focusing on caste, religion, region, and media-driven symbolic politics. It examines how political parties mobilize caste-based and communal identities for electoral gain, often through welfare populism, cultural revivalism, and targeted media narratives. The rise of parties like the BSP and RJD illustrates how historically marginalized communities have asserted political agency, while populist strategies—such as targeted subsidies and symbolic gestures—serve to consolidate support without challenging structural inequalities. The study also investigates the role of regional nationalism and sub-nationalist movements in shaping political discourses, particularly in Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir, and the Northeast. Media is identified as a crucial actor in identity construction, amplifying symbolic narratives and reinforcing group solidarities.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence and consolidation of caste-based political parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) reflect a strategic reordering of electoral politics in post-Mandal India. These parties did not merely respond to pre-existing caste hierarchies; they actively transformed the way identity was articulated and politicised within the democratic framework. The rise of such formations signalled a shift in political agency—from elite-dominated leadership to the assertion of historically marginalised social groups. The BSP's electoral strategy was grounded in the political awakening of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh. Founded on the ideological foundations laid by Kanshi Ram and later expanded under Mayawati's leadership, the party positioned itself as a vehicle for Dalit assertion and autonomy. It rejected tokenistic representation and instead sought to institutionalise a Dalit-led political order. The use of symbolic politics—such as the construction of statues, renaming of public spaces, and celebration of Dalit icons—was not ornamental. It was a deliberate method of reshaping public memory and challenging the dominance of upper-caste cultural symbols.

However, the BSP's success was not based on identity mobilisation alone. Its alliance-building with Brahmins during the 2007 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections indicated a tactical shift from caste exclusivity to social engineering. The party constructed a votebank that merged identity affirmation with electoral pragmatism. Critics often reduced this shift to opportunism, but it reflected a deeper understanding of the fluid nature of caste alliances in a competitive democratic context. The momentary success of such a coalition showed that caste mobilisation, to sustain power, must evolve into broader political strategies rather than rely solely on grievance politics.

The RJD followed a different trajectory. Rooted in the political history of Bihar, the party derived its legitimacy from the empowerment of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), especially Yadavs, under Lalu Prasad Yadav's leadership. The RJD positioned itself as the guardian of Mandal politics, vocally opposing upper-caste domination and framing itself as the political voice of social justice. Lalu's appeal was constructed through his performative populism—his accessible style, rustic rhetoric, and anti-elitist posture. The RJD thus fused caste mobilisation with populist leadership, creating a strong emotional bond with its core electorate.

Despite its early success, the RJD struggled to expand its base beyond Yadavs and Muslims. Accusations of misgovernance and patronage politics weakened its legitimacy, particularly among the youth and upwardly mobile sections of OBCs who sought better employment opportunities and development outcomes. The party's over-reliance on identity mobilisation failed to adapt to the changing aspirations of its electorate. Unlike the BSP's occasional attempts to reframe its caste agenda into inclusive governance, the RJD was often viewed as entrenching caste-based patronage networks rather than dismantling them.

The broader debate on caste-based parties must move beyond moral critiques of identity politics. These parties emerged in response to institutional exclusion and structural inequalities.

Their presence in the political arena forced mainstream parties to recalibrate their approach to representation and policy. However, their long-term relevance depends on how effectively they navigate the tension between identity-based mobilisation and developmental governance. Electoral success cannot rest indefinitely on caste arithmetic alone. Voters increasingly demand accountability, welfare delivery, and access to opportunity alongside recognition.

Research Objectives

The study aims to critically examine how identity politics—rooted in caste, religion, and regional affiliations—shapes electoral strategies and governance in Indian states; to analyse the role of populist policies in consolidating political support through welfare schemes and symbolic gestures; to explore the influence of regional and sub-nationalist movements on federal-state dynamics; to investigate the function of media in constructing and reinforcing political identities; and to assess the implications of identity-based mobilisation on democratic representation, policy priorities, and long-term development.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodological approach, relying on thematic content analysis of secondary sources such as academic literature, policy documents, electoral data, and media reports. The study draws on case studies of regional political parties, populist welfare schemes, and identity-based mobilisation strategies across various Indian states including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat. Discourse analysis is applied to examine the use of symbols, slogans, and media narratives in constructing political identities. The methodology also involves a comparative framework to understand the differential impact of caste, religious, and regional identities on electoral outcomes and governance patterns.

Electoral Strategies Targeting Caste Blocks

Caste continues to function as a central axis around which electoral strategies are constructed in many Indian states. Political parties rarely engage with caste as a purely ideological issue; instead, they treat it as a calculable variable in vote bank arithmetic. The construction of caste blocks for electoral gains does not rest on addressing structural social inequalities but rather on the capacity to aggregate votes through selective inclusion and symbolic representation (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004). The formulation of caste-based alliances often begins with the identification of numerically dominant groups in a given constituency. In Uttar Pradesh, for example, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) strategically mobilized Dalits as a consolidated political identity, later attempting to expand its base through the inclusion of Brahmins under the 'social engineering' strategy. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in contrast, has recalibrated its electoral strategy in the same state by engaging non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs), particularly after realizing that Yadavs remained largely aligned with the Samajwadi Party. Such strategic compartmentalization reflects a calculated effort to fragment caste blocks for maximum electoral advantage (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Targeted welfare delivery is often linked to these strategies. Political parties frequently roll out schemes that are framed as universal but are deployed in a manner that visibly benefits specific caste groups. The distribution of job reservations, housing subsidies, or agricultural loan waivers is often used to consolidate caste-based support without formal acknowledgement. For instance, in Bihar, Nitish Kumar's governance model has actively catered to Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs) and Mahadalits, using targeted welfare as a means of electoral consolidation (Varshney, 2002).

Candidate selection serves as another critical tool for caste-targeted mobilisation. Political parties allocate tickets not purely on merit but based on caste arithmetic. A party aiming to win in a constituency dominated by a particular caste often fields a candidate from that caste, regardless of administrative competence or ideological commitment (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004). This instrumentalization of representation reinforces caste hierarchies rather than challenging them, reducing politics to a system of transactional appeasement. Symbolic gestures play a parallel role in consolidating caste support. Public commemorations of caste icons, installation of statues, or renaming of welfare schemes in honour of community leaders are used to signal political allegiance (Srinivasulu, 2003). These acts do not necessarily translate into long-term structural change but serve the immediate purpose of caste identity reinforcement. In Maharashtra, the invocation of Chhatrapati Shivaji among Marathas, or in Tamil Nadu, the evocation of Periyar's legacy by Dravidian parties, operates within this symbolic framework.

The success of caste-based electoral strategies depends on the ability of parties to maintain a balance between competing caste interests. Overemphasis on one group can alienate others, leading to backlash or fragmentation of the support base. In Karnataka, the political volatility of the Vokkaliga and Lingayat vote banks illustrates how failure to equitably manage caste alliances can weaken electoral performance. Hence, parties often attempt to construct cross-caste coalitions through promises of proportional representation and distributed patronage (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004).

Caste-based mobilisation does not emerge in a political vacuum; it is embedded in histories of exclusion and assertion. Electoral strategies that exploit caste divisions often ignore deeper questions of justice, empowerment, and redistribution. Rather than dismantling caste hierarchies, such strategies reinforce them through competitive populism. The pursuit of votes through caste-targeted appeals rarely engages with caste as a question of social transformation; instead, it is reduced to a tactical variable for short-term electoral success (Varshney, 2002).

The reliance on caste blocks as a foundational element of electoral strategy points to the enduring relevance of identity politics in Indian democracy. Parties continue to operate within a framework that prioritizes demographic arithmetic over ideological coherence or long-term developmental vision. As a result, caste remains a mobilizing force not because of its intrinsic value but because political actors constantly invest in its strategic reproduction. Mandal politics has fundamentally reoriented caste-based mobilisation in India by institutionalising affirmative action as a tool for political assertion. The implementation of the

Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 was not merely a policy decision but a strategic response to long-standing demands for equitable representation among historically disadvantaged communities. This move catalysed the formation of a new political discourse centred on social justice, wherein caste identity was redefined not as a marker of subjugation but as a legitimate basis for state-mediated redress (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004).

The decision to extend reservations to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) was grounded in the principle that historical disadvantage required active state intervention to ensure substantive equality (Srinivasulu, 2003). Yet, the backlash from upper-caste groups exposed deep social fissures and challenged the claim that caste-based quotas were universally acceptable instruments of justice. Political parties that embraced Mandal politics, such as the Janata Dal and its offshoots, managed to convert caste assertion into electoral capital by reframing social justice as a democratic right rather than a welfare concession (Varshney, 2002).

Contrary to the notion that caste-based mobilisation undermines national unity, the Mandal discourse expanded democratic participation among communities that had previously been marginalised from political power. The increased presence of OBC leaders in state legislatures and the Lok Sabha signalled a recalibration of the power structure. For instance, the rise of leaders such as Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh respectively was not simply a regional phenomenon but indicative of a broader redistribution of political agency. Opponents of Mandal politics often argue that caste-based quotas perpetuate divisions and foster resentment. However, this critique fails to account for the entrenched nature of caste hierarchies in education, employment, and governance, which neutral policies had historically failed to dismantle. In such a context, the social justice discourse advanced through Mandal politics challenged the myth of a meritocratic state and foregrounded structural inequality as a political problem (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004).

Moreover, the ideological shift brought about by Mandal politics influenced the vocabulary of Indian democracy. The term “social justice” began to occupy a central place in electoral manifestos, public discourse, and judicial reasoning. Political mobilisation around caste moved from being reactive to being programmatic, with demands for reservations in private employment and educational institutions gaining ground. This evolution not only reshaped state-level politics but also forced national parties to reconsider their social base and ideological positioning.

RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN POLITICS

The persistence of communal politics in India cannot be dismissed as episodic or externally driven. It reflects a deeply embedded political strategy that leverages religious identity for electoral consolidation. The deployment of communal narratives, symbolic gestures, and targeted welfare schemes is often designed to secure and stabilise vote banks, particularly in states marked by religious diversity and inter-group tension. Rather than

functioning merely as a byproduct of historical conflict, communal politics has been institutionalised through party strategies, media rhetoric, and administrative practices (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004). Majoritarian narratives have gained traction in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, where political actors have deliberately framed national identity in terms of religious exclusivity. The projection of Hindutva as both cultural ethos and political framework has allowed parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to consolidate Hindu votes across caste and class lines. Mobilisation occurs not only through overt religious appeals but also through coded language—such as "love jihad," cow protection, and temple construction—that signals allegiance to a communal agenda without necessarily violating formal secular norms (Srinivasulu, 2003).

In Gujarat, the long-standing dominance of communal rhetoric since the early 2000s has restructured the public sphere. Political discourse often privileges narratives of national security and cultural pride, marginalising minority grievances as anti-national or appeasement-based. This framing allows the state to recast welfare distribution, policing, and urban development in majoritarian terms. Vote bank politics, in such cases, is not limited to minority mobilisation but is actively practised through majoritarian identity consolidation (Varshney, 2002).

On the other hand, parties such as the Indian National Congress, Samajwadi Party, and Trinamool Congress have historically engaged in minority vote consolidation through targeted welfare, representation, and symbolic inclusion. Critics have labelled these strategies as appeasement, arguing that such politics reinforce communal divisions by reducing religious identity to a tool for electoral arithmetic. In states like West Bengal, for instance, the political rhetoric around minority welfare has been used both to attract Muslim voters and to provoke a counter-majoritarian backlash, thereby polarising the electorate (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004).

The electoral logic behind such strategies relies on the predictability of group-based voting. Political campaigns often assume that religious identity translates into voting loyalty, which then justifies the selective targeting of communities for both benefits and blame. This process creates an environment where policy decisions, administrative appointments, and legal action are evaluated through a communal lens, weakening institutional neutrality. Communal politics also reshapes the relationship between state and citizen. In riot-prone areas, such as Muzaffarnagar or Godhra, state inaction or complicity during communal violence has eroded the credibility of law enforcement. Vote bank strategies in such contexts are maintained not through policy delivery but through fear, dependency, and the instrumentalisation of violence. Political gain from communal polarisation often outweighs the social cost of deepening divisions, as short-term electoral victories are prioritised over long-term social cohesion.

However, the assumption that communal vote banks are stable and permanent has been increasingly challenged. In recent years, evidence from states like Bihar and Kerala shows that religious identity does not always dictate electoral behaviour. Voters have responded to governance quality, economic performance, and caste-based mobilisation even when

communal narratives are actively deployed. This suggests that identity politics has to be maintained through constant reproduction—it does not sustain itself without active effort from political and ideological apparatuses (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Regional Nationalism and Sub-Nationalism

Regional nationalism and sub-nationalism have become enduring and significant influences in Indian politics, propelled by declarations of linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. These political expressions are not outliers in the context of Indian federalism; rather, they are grounded in the constitutional acknowledgement of linguistic reorganisation and administrative decentralisation. The claim of sub-national identities often emerges as a reaction to perceived political marginalisation, economic neglect, or cultural erasure by the central state or prevailing national narratives. The establishment of linguistic states in the 1950s formalised the foundation for the development of regional identities. States like Tamil Nadu and Punjab have worked hard to create stories that put the state's interests in direct conflict with pan-Indian nationalism (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004). The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu used Tamil language and culture pride to fight against what they saw as the imposition of Hindi and North Indian political domination. The long-term success of Dravidian parties at the polls shows that sub-nationalist movements may turn identity into a long-lasting political enterprise.

In the northeastern states, regional nationalism often has a more pronounced ethnic dimension. Claims of autonomy in states like Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur are based on past wrongs and a strong feeling of ethnic identity. The desire for more self-governance, and in some instances sovereignty, is propelled not just by cultural heterogeneity but also by a legacy of political negotiation and, at times, violent conflict with the Indian state. The autonomy provided by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution or via distinct agreements has only partly fulfilled these expectations. The desire for Gorkhaland or Bodoland is an example of how sub-nationalism keeps coming back in new ways when people think the current arrangements aren't good enough (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Sub-nationalism often shows itself in less violent but nevertheless politically strong ways. The Shiv Sena in Maharashtra first spoke out against what it viewed as the economic incursion of non-Maharashtrians, especially South Indians and then North Indians, by promoting a nativist Marathi identity. These kinds of regional mobilisations are generally based on rivalry for jobs, cultural space, and resources in cities. The allure of these groups is in their capacity to portray regional pride as a means of opposition to homogenisation. Religious sub-nationalism adds an additional layer to this issue. In Jammu and Kashmir, identity has been formed not just through geographical uniqueness but also through religious connection, leading to a precarious amalgamation of ethno-religious nationalism (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004). The repeal of Article 370 in 2019 changed the state's formal connection with the Indian Union, but it didn't get rid of the fundamental problems that have traditionally led to sub-national ambitions. Political parties in different states have reacted to these changes in different ways. To fight against central authority, regional parties typically adopt sub-nationalist

language (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004). They also want more financial independence and unique economic packages. Even national parties often change their methods to fit local identity markers when they work at the state level to stay relevant. The Congress in Assam and the BJP in Tripura have had to deal with ethnic claims in order to be competitive in elections. The process shows that sub-nationalism is not only a threat to Indian democracy, but is also a part of how it works every day.

Sub-nationalist claims are not intrinsically separatist. A lot of these movements want acknowledgement, redistribution, and representation instead of isolation. They want room in the federal system to express their own regional interests. The continued existence of these demands demonstrates the enduring conflict between unity and diversity inside the Indian political system. When people think the government is ignoring their regional needs, sub-nationalist mobilisation becomes a way to fight for power and freedom. Instead of disappearing as nationalism becomes more centralised or homogenised, regional and sub-national identities have frequently come back stronger than before. These identities continue to define political discourse, affect policy choices, and constrain center-state interactions. Their persistence indicates that Indian federalism functions not by the repression of diversity, but by ongoing contestation and accommodation (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Religious and ethnic identity conflicts have become instrumental tools in shaping electoral strategies across several Indian states. Political actors increasingly rely on these identity markers not merely to represent community interests but to craft narratives that provoke allegiance and polarisation. Rather than resolving deep-rooted societal divisions, electoral politics often repurposes them for short-term gains, thereby reinforcing boundaries that might otherwise have faded through democratic engagement and social integration (Varshney, 2002).

The mobilisation of religious identity, particularly around communal fault lines, creates a dichotomy between self and other. This dichotomy is politically useful in constituencies where parties seek to consolidate a majority vote through fear, memory, or perceived threat (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004). The 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent communal riots, for instance, were followed by sharp electoral gains for parties that projected themselves as defenders of Hindu identity. In Gujarat, the 2002 riots were succeeded by an electoral consolidation of Hindu votes, allowing the ruling party to frame the election as a choice between cultural protection and religious appeasement.

Ethnic identities, especially in states with tribal populations or linguistic minorities, are similarly manipulated to create blocs of loyal voters. In Assam, demands for the protection of Assamese identity against Bengali-speaking immigrants were leveraged through legislation such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). These moves redefined political discourse by drawing lines between 'indigenous' and 'outsider,' with parties using these distinctions to forge new vote banks rooted in exclusion. Electoral utility arises not just from identity mobilisation, but from the calculated escalation of identity-based tensions during campaigns. Politicians deploy historical grievances and cultural

narratives to suggest that the survival of a community hinges on their electoral success. The result is a deliberate heightening of communal or ethnic anxieties, which transforms identity into a political currency. Such tactics displace discussions on economic development or governance, reducing elections to symbolic battles of cultural assertion (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004).

While identity politics often claims to represent the marginalised, its operationalisation in electoral terms tends to flatten intra-group differences. The Muslim vote, for example, is frequently treated as a monolith, ignoring divisions based on class, region, or sect. Similarly, tribal communities are homogenised for electoral purposes, even when their demands and experiences vary widely across districts. These simplifications allow parties to craft targeted messages that secure votes but do little to address the actual grievances or aspirations of those communities (Srinivasulu, 2003).

In practice, identity conflicts are seldom resolved after elections. The temporary cohesion achieved through polarisation usually disintegrates in the absence of structural reforms or inclusive governance. Yet, for many political actors, the cyclical nature of elections permits repeated reliance on identity narratives without the burden of delivering long-term solutions. Such a strategy may yield electoral success, but it corrodes the democratic ideal of political representation grounded in shared policy interests and common citizenship (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004).

Hence, the electoral utility of religious and ethnic identity conflicts lies not in their resolution but in their perpetuation. They serve as efficient mechanisms for political mobilisation, even as they deepen societal divisions. Rather than acting as a bridge between the state and underrepresented groups, identity politics often functions as a wedge that fragments public discourse and redirects attention away from substantive issues of governance and development (Varshney, 2002).

POPULIST POLICIES AND ELECTORAL SUCCESS

Welfare programs and material incentives in Indian elections are a planned sort of populism that aims to acquire political allegiance by offering immediate and concrete advantages. People commonly call programs like free energy, cash transfers, mid-day meals, and subsidised grain "fiscal populism" or "electoral bribery." This approach, however, simplifies a complicated interplay of governance, redistribution, and political survival into basic economic reasoning. The use of so-called "freebies" has to be looked at in light of the state's ability to provide them, what voters anticipate, and the political economics of poverty. The mid-day meal policy, which started in Tamil Nadu and spread to the rest of the country in the early 2000s, was not only a way to get votes. It dealt with a number of structural problems, such as school enrolment, child nutrition, and gender equality. Voters liked it not just because it helped people, but also because they saw it every day. Mid-day meals, on the other hand, have concrete, everyday effects that immediately impact family choices. This is not the case with capital-intensive projects or long-term changes. Their political appeal comes from how

quickly and widely they may be used, especially by impoverished people. On the other hand, programs like giving farmers free electricity or giving cash to certain categories of workers sometimes only help a small set of people. In Punjab, the promise of free power has been a key feature of political campaigns for all parties, even if it may not be financially or environmentally sound. People generally keep these perks even when there is proof that they are being used or wasted since taking them away may lead to an instant reaction in the next election. These kinds of plans make people politically dependent by turning public commodities into tools of loyalty and clientelism.

However, the dichotomy between welfare and populism becomes untenable when voter agency is recognised (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004). The impoverished don't only take; they also judge. Welfare programs only operate when they are regularly given and are part of a bigger picture of governmental legitimacy. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, the effectiveness of programs like Amma Vodi (helping mothers pay for their children's education) and YSR Pension Kanuka (pensions for older and handicapped people) has been connected to how people see the government as being responsive and easy to reach. When people feel that the state understands their needs and acts without too much red tape, these programs turn into votes (Srinivasulu, 2003). Critics say that these kinds of measures mess up development goals and take money away from fixing infrastructure or institutions. But these kinds of arguments typically use an abstract model of governance that doesn't take into account the reality of political struggle and socio-economic inequality. Welfare programs provide as safety nets in areas where getting a job, getting medical treatment, or getting an education is still difficult (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004). They show that the state is there in places where formal institutions have not worked in the past (Varshney, 2002).

At the same time, unbridled welfare populism may put a pressure on the budget for a long time. States like Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan have seen their subsidy payments go up, which makes it harder to invest in capital projects or build up institutional capacity. Politicians don't want to justify subsidies because they are afraid of backlash, which leads to a cycle in which governments put short-term profits ahead of long-term changes. This pattern is not limited to a single party or philosophy; it encompasses both regional and national entities, indicating a common electoral rationale rather than a split in policy. The success of elections tied to welfare distribution also relies on the way benefits are presented and spoken about. Political stories turn government plans into signs of party identity. The Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi has utilised power subsidies, access to water, and free bus rides for women as both policy tools and proof that they are running the government in a way that is different from both national and regional rivals. The party's message turns service delivery into a moral argument for fairness and responsibility, which makes it more than just a political transaction. In many Indian states, building a "pro-poor" political identity has become a planned way to win elections. Political figures are increasingly creating policy narratives and public images that make them seem like they are protecting the poor, even when they don't always make changes to the system that would get to the core of poverty. This performative style of governing is not random; it is

meticulously planned to work with populist strategies that connect political commitment to short-term financial gains (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004).

The way welfare payments are given out is a big part of how people see the government as being pro-poor. State governments have broadened the range of cash transfers, subsidised meals, housing initiatives, and targeted utility services, not alone for economic reasons but also as instruments of political affiliation. Tamil Nadu's Amma Canteens, Delhi's free power, and Chhattisgarh's rice distribution program are all examples of welfare programs that also work to build support among a certain class of people. Putting the leader's name on welfare initiatives makes the link between helping the poor and the kindness of the governing regime even stronger. These kinds of populist actions frequently avoid bigger discussions about public investment, job creation, or budgetary sustainability. They instead concentrate on immediacy and exposure. For example, direct benefit transfers let political leaders take credit for personalised economic assistance while hiding the fact that there is no long-term developmental infrastructure. The rationale for these interventions is mostly rooted in political gain rather than developmental consistency (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004).

The language used in pro-poor politics generally uses binary oppositions, such as wealthy vs. poor and elite vs. average citizen. Political leaders frequently use their own backgrounds or populist symbols of simplicity to make themselves seem like moral advocates of the poor. In Uttar Pradesh, this kind of talking helped parties appeal to both rural poor and lower caste voters by making themselves seem like they were against urban elites or entrenched bureaucracies. These kinds of depictions get people from all castes and religions to vote for the same person, bringing together different groups under one economic identity (Srinivasulu, 2003).

But just because this method works doesn't mean that power will be shared. Building a pro-poor image usually gives more power to the executive branch, which makes the legislative or institutional branches less accountable. A lot of the time, welfare programs are run from the top down, which hurts local groups and makes it harder for people to plan together. Consequently, beneficiaries transform into passive receivers of governmental generosity instead of active participants in democratic decision-making.

Also, these initiatives will only work if the state has enough resources and money to keep them going (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004). When governments have trouble with their budgets or with getting things done on time, pro-poor politics loses its credibility. In many cases, the story of kindness might easily transform into one of treachery. Some rural areas during the epidemic showed how weak welfare systems that depend too much on political charisma instead of institutional strength are when they don't give out subsidies or job guarantees on time. The development of a pro-poor image signifies a deliberate reorientation of populism. It substitutes structural reform with targeted alleviation, changes the meaning of distributive justice through performative gestures, and turns reliance into a way to win votes. It may help politicians in the near term, but its long-term effects on democratic accountability and economic change are yet unclear. Populist governance and pro-poor symbols may attract

big voter bases, but they frequently do not address the fundamental socio-economic disparities that keep people in poverty (Varshney, 2002). Populist policies generally get support because they offer quick help to those who are having trouble with money, but they often don't have the structural support they need to last. Political parties use this to win elections by appealing to the emotions of the masses instead of using good economic policies. In places with a lot of rural suffering, loan waivers, free energy, cash transfers, and subsidised food grains have been utilised a lot to get people to vote. These plans may help with short-term demands, but they usually don't deal with bigger problems like poor productivity, bad infrastructure, and a lack of job growth (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Using populist policies to win elections puts a pressure on governmental resources. When governments continuously prioritise spending on subsidies over capital investment, resources are allocated in a way that doesn't make sense. For example, Punjab and Tamil Nadu have had to deal with financial problems since they promised to provide farmers free energy and give out a lot of benefits. The increasing load of subsidies makes it harder for the government to invest in education, healthcare, and industrial growth, which are all important for the economy to be strong in the long run. Populist techniques also tend to make people dependent on them, which makes the need for fundamental changes weaker. Instead of talking about things like land reform, workers' rights, or making taxes more fair, parties concentrate on giving out goodies that keep people loyal without changing the economy. This kind of strategy could help politicians in the near term, but it hurts innovation and productivity development. A obvious example is the numerous loan waivers that farmers in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh have received. These exemptions provide farmers some temporary respite, but they don't change the root reasons of their problems, such not having enough water, prices that change all the time, and cycles of debt that come from getting loans from people who aren't banks.

Many populist plans are paid for by the government borrowing more money, which makes people worry about the country's finances. When states have a lot of debt, they can't handle future economic shocks as well. They also make investors less confident, particularly when governments take back changes that were meant to help them win votes. Policies that combine social welfare with budgetary restraint are needed for economic viability. This is an equation that populists frequently forget about. Populism often makes it harder for institutions to be held accountable. When winning elections depends on personal charm and popularity, it becomes harder to prepare for the future and keep the government running smoothly. Leaders rely on high-profile actions instead of data-driven governance, which makes decision-making more reactive than strategic. For example, populist plans often grow quickly before elections without any study of how well they would work or how long they will last. This leads to a system of government that is based on election cycles instead of economic reasoning (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Populist policies may win over voters in the short term, but long-term exposure to inflation, economic stagnation, and service delivery failures may make people lose faith. In

places like Bihar and Rajasthan, where populist governments have not been able to create jobs or build industries, people have become more unhappy even if assistance is still being given out (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004). These instances indicate that political allegiance cannot be indefinitely guaranteed only via populist privileges, particularly when overarching economic ambitions remain unmet. So, populism, when it's not linked to economic planning and institutional change, makes it hard to have long-term progress. It could provide quick political gains, but it will hurt budgetary discipline, economic efficiency, and long-term wellbeing. If state-level politics is to connect electoral victory with long-lasting economic change, it is still necessary to move away from populist expediency and towards developmental policies.

MEDIA, SYMBOLS AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In India, regional media has not only served as a channel for information but also as a dynamic force in shaping and solidifying political and cultural identities. Its impact beyond mere news distribution, into the realms of symbolic representation, electoral conduct, and quotidian notions of belonging. Regional media, on the other hand, shows and reinforces subnational goals, pride in language, and ethnic solidarity. National media, on the other hand, tends to show a single story about the nation-state.

States like Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Maharashtra are good examples of how regional media has affected identity politics. In Tamil Nadu, the strong link between films and politics helped the Dravidian movement become very well-known. Dravidian leaders like M.G. Ramachandran and M. Karunanidhi used films as a way to get their political messages out. The writing and performances on screen supported anti-Brahminical ideas and Tamil pride in the language. Party-affiliated newspapers and TV stations spread this message into people's daily lives, creating a feeling of cultural distinctiveness and resistance to northern tyranny. Historically, media outlets in West Bengal that were friendly to the Left Front offered stories about class struggle and anti-imperialist nationalism. Even if the Left lost support in elections, regional media nevertheless had a role in moulding political vocabulary by framing arguments around issues like labour, migration, and state control (Srinivasulu, 2003). More recently, media that supports the Trinamool Congress has concentrated on Bengali cultural pride, regional autonomy, and being against what they see as impositions from the federal government. These changes in editorial emphasis are part of a plan to create a regional identity that promotes political legitimacy (Varshney, 2002). Patterns of ownership make the link between media and regional identity politics more stronger. Political players possess or have a lot of power over several regional television networks and print enterprises. The Telugu Desam Party and YSR Congress have direct interests in television networks in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. This lets them mould public discourse, silence dissident voices, and control symbolic representation. The outcome is a highly regulated media landscape in which identity narratives advance party agendas while simultaneously mirroring grassroots sentiments.

Nonetheless, media-driven identity building is not exclusive to elite manipulation. It works with local history, language ties, and community problems to create emotional ties.

Coverage of regional festivals, folk customs, or local heroes serves as more than just cultural reporting; it fortifies the idea of a defined and identifiable community. By doing this, regional media helps to define who is in and who is out in terms of language, religion, and politics. The employment of regional media to strengthen identity also has an effect on governmental policy. When the media tells a story, governments frequently react by passing symbolic laws, such language protection statutes, changing the names of towns, or giving money to regional filmmakers. These policy changes aren't just cultural choices; they're also purposeful actions to meet identity-based expectations that media stories have created and spread. Political leaders make sure that their messages match what is said on TV, so that party communication and media representation support one other.

Even though it has a long history of building identities, regional media has nevertheless been criticised. People have said that it is parochial, spreads false information, and puts feelings ahead of facts. In nations with strong linguistic nationalism, opposing voices—especially those who support cross-regional collaboration or challenge exclusion based on identity—often don't get much attention in popular conversations (Varshney, 2002). When the media is divided along party lines, it makes it less likely that they would report neutrally and makes most problems seem like they are either loyal or opposed to something. Political actors utilise symbols on purpose, including slogans, flags, and monuments, as a way to build their own identity and get more votes. These symbols serve as tools for emotional mobilisation, distilling intricate historical narratives into familiar imagery or slogans that elicit allegiance, belonging, or resentment. Instead of being passive cultural objects, these things are used to shape political meaning and strengthen identity politics (Srinivasulu, 2003).

Slogans, for instance, are not only meant to get ideas over, but also to make people feel something in the groups they are meant to reach. The power of words like "Garibi Hatao" during Indira Gandhi's time in office or "Jai Bhim" in Dalit movements comes from the fact that they can turn ideas into short, easy-to-say statements. These slogans do not elaborate on specific policies; rather, they situate the speaker within a moral framework of justice, resistance, or protection (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004). Their recurrence in public discourse aids in the formation of a communal identity based on either desire or opposition. Flags and colour patterns can show which group someone belongs to. In regional movements like those in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Telangana, the creation and display of regional flags have been used to show independence and cultural differences. Political parties and movements employ colours and patterns on purpose to show their ideological viewpoints and historical connections. The saffron hue, which Hindutva groups use a lot, or the red flag of Left parties, may stand for bigger political ideas, making it easy to recognise and agree with them. The visual consistency that these symbols provide helps people build a common political identity that goes beyond written communication. Monuments help identity politics become real by putting them in physical space. Their architecture frequently serves two purposes: to remember and to plan. Putting up monuments of community leaders or famous people from history shows that certain social groupings are recognised and have power. For example, putting up monuments of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Dalit settlements is not only a way to honour him, but it

is also a way to demand dignity and representation in such areas. Likewise, big memorial projects like the Shivaji monument in Mumbai or the Ambedkar Memorial Park in Lucknow are examples of how the government tries to make identity stories a part of the city's fabric (Varshney, 2002).

During elections, when it is mixed with ritual and spectacle, symbolism becomes even more powerful. Political rallies, roadshows, and campaign materials use a lot of symbolic performance to connect leaders and people on an emotional and visual level. In these situations, the physical presence of a monument or the repeating of a slogan takes the place of policy details, changing the political landscape from discussion and criticism to feelings and connections. But symbolic politics does have its critics. When one culture uses symbols, other communities frequently feel anxious or opposed. Changing the names of streets, rewriting history, or changing public memorials may cause a lot of anger, as shown in the fights over Mughal-era monuments or colonial legacies. These kinds of disputes show that symbols are not neutral; they are places where power is fought over. Being in charge of symbols frequently means being in charge of public memory and political legitimacy. The media is very important for making these symbolic messages louder. Political ads, social media campaigns, and TV news stories spread symbols beyond their geographical constituency and into the national conversation. The viral nature of hashtags and political memes based on symbolic images makes political identification spread much further than where it started (Srinivasulu, 2003). Political stories that employ symbols show that people are trying to influence how others think about things. These symbolic actions are not additional to politics; they are an integral component of its fundamental operations. They form loyalties, direct how people see things, and affect political decisions. As identity politics becomes more important in different states, using slogans, flags, and monuments to create strong, emotive forms of political loyalty is still a main way to do so. The symbolic field therefore transforms into a contentious domain where visibility, recognition, and control are as vital as legislative authority. Cultural revivalism has been deliberately used as a political tool to develop and sustain identity-based narratives, with the media playing a crucial part in distributing these themes. Political figures have used cultural symbols, allusions to myths, and new interpretations of history to help people feel like they belong to a group (Dyson, Cassen, & Visaria, 2004). The intentional use of religious holidays, attempts to restore temples, and the praise of old texts or monarchs is not usually just about keeping culture alive. These actions serve as coded political signals that strengthen identification and create symbolic power (Varshney, 2002).

The employment of media in this process is not at all accidental. Television shows, movies, social media campaigns, and political rallies all show carefully chosen pictures and stories that connect pride in one's culture with devotion to a political party. The television retelling of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in the late 1980s, for instance, happened at the same time as the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, which was a political movement (Srinivasulu, 2003). These works were not only for fun; they helped people develop a national Hindu identity and got them ready for a political goal based on religious and cultural dominance (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004). Revivalist symbolism often aims at the

majority group, portraying it as the legitimate guardian of national history. In this context, minority cultures are either integrated into the dominant culture or portrayed as foreign to the national identity. Promoting Hindi above regional languages, elevating cow preservation as a moral necessity, or presenting Vedic science as superior to contemporary fields all help to strengthen an identity that excludes others. These kinds of actions push linguistic, regional, and religious variety to the side in the sake of cultural authenticity (Bhattacharya, Jayal, Mohapatra, & Pai, 2004). Cultural revivalism also lets political parties change the subject from material problems. When temple building, historical retribution, or the commemoration of old greatness are the main topics of debate, people pay less attention to issues about jobs, poverty, or education. This change of course is not by chance. It gives people a symbolic script that stirs up their emotions and makes them loyal, which frequently keeps people from looking too closely at problems with the government.

CONCLUSION

Media channels aligned with dominant political narratives amplify revivalist messages through repetition, spectacle, and emotional framing. Rituals and events are often broadcast live with dramatic commentary, transforming cultural acts into political performances. The construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, for instance, has been presented not merely as a religious development but as a civilisational correction, thereby linking contemporary politics with a selective memory of the past. Such messaging often reduces cultural identity to simplified representations, turning multifaceted traditions into political slogans. The instrumentalisation of symbols like the saffron flag, the Ganga river, or traditional attire detaches them from their historical or spiritual context and converts them into rallying points for political assertion. This process enables parties to claim cultural legitimacy while deploying it for electoral mobilisation. In this context, cultural revivalism does not function as an apolitical celebration of heritage. It becomes a calculated method of identity construction, employed to organise public consciousness around selective narratives. The resulting identity politics strengthens majoritarian power, marginalises pluralism, and transforms citizenship from a rights-based concept into one defined through cultural loyalty. When cultural symbols are politicised in this manner, the space for critical inquiry and dissent shrinks, making identity-based conformity a condition for political belonging.

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