

## **Indian Democracy Under Threat: The BJP's Online Authoritarian Populism as a Means to Advance an Ethnoreligious Nationalist Agenda in the 2019 General Election**

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The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi has been a pioneer of technologically enabled authoritarian populism, elected by a landslide in 2014 and reelected in 2019. However, India's online authoritarian populism is relatively understudied with important questions remaining about the prevalence of authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist messages and mobilization around these ideologies. This research examines a representative sample of pro-BJP discourse on Twitter in the final week of the 2019 campaign. It finds the BJP used authoritarian populist strategies to advance an ethnoreligious nationalist agenda. Traditional media were excluded. Social media allowed direct leader-to-people connection, facilitating a personality cult around Modi. Online opinion leaders, often overlooked in studies of political campaigns, advanced the most extreme ethnoreligious nationalism, including religiously polarizing misinformation. These ideologies and strategies are dangerous to Indian democracy.

*Keywords: India, political communication, political campaigning, elections, Internet, social media, Twitter, BJP, Modi, authoritarian populism, ethnoreligious nationalism*

Democracy has been in decline for 15 years, with continued expansion of authoritarian rule and floods of false and misleading information (Repucci & Sipowitz, 2021). Authoritarian expansion is occurring not only in long-term authoritarian states but also in democracies (Repucci & Sipowitz, 2021). Numerous countries have elected authoritarian populist leaders who promote values that threaten the norms of liberal democracy (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The majority of recently failed democracies have been brought down by democratically elected leaders (Diamond, 2015).

The health of democracy relies on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994), with these qualities and attitudes underpinned by access to factual and (relatively) impartial

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information about politics (Almond & Verba, 1963; Habermas, 1989; Schudson, 2002) and societal structures teaching civic virtues and shared identities (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994). These foundations have been profoundly changed by the transformation of information ecosystems and societal structures precipitated by Internet technologies. The algorithms underpinning online platforms favor extreme, emotive, and divisive content, propelling authoritarian practices (Deibert, 2019). Social media are strategically used by politicians to disseminate right-wing populist discourses (Kreis, 2017).

India's Narendra Modi brought the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; Indian People's Party) to power in 2014 on the back of a technologically innovative campaign. The campaign was a pioneer in the use of social media for right-wing populist mobilization, even serving as a case study for Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's 2016 chief campaign strategist (Cesarino, 2020). Despite this and despite Modi's successful reelection campaign in 2019, there has been a lack of attention to India in studies of contemporary authoritarian populism as well as limited attention to India in studies of online political communication. Extant research largely focuses on Modi's or official party's accounts (e.g., Ahmed, Jaidka, & Cho, 2016; Bajaj, 2017; Kanungo, 2015; Pal, Mistree, & Madhani, 2018). This cannot speak to wider discursive ecosystems and the mobilization of citizens behind ideologies.

This article focuses on two core concepts: authoritarian populism and ethnoreligious nationalism. Authoritarian populism is a political ideology that combines the threatening other of authoritarianism with the political mobilization and concepts of people and elite of populism (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019). Ethnoreligious nationalism is a nation-building ideology that seeks to impose national majoritarian culture on all those who live in the state (Girvin, 2020). Combining these concepts, this research analyzes the discursive mobilization of Indian citizens behind authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist ideologies on social media by the BJP in the 2019 Indian general election, using a representative sample of Twitter data.

It finds discourse exceeded normal partisanship and followed an authoritarian populist playbook, constructing a narrative of threat and a single, charismatic leader to save the people from the fear they live under. These authoritarian populist strategies were targeted at an ethnoreligious nationalist problem and solution that aimed to refashion Indian democracy and nationalism along ethnoreligious lines. This was underpinned by the development of a personality cult around Modi as a devout leader with a direct connection to the people. This party-bypassing leader-people connection as well as extreme and emotive expressions of threat thrive on social media, with an ecosystem that relies on celebrities and public individuals as mediators, bypassing the role of news media in democratic life. Although the world's largest democracy with the second-largest population of Internet users, India is understudied within political communications. As such, this study adds significantly to our understanding of the global authoritarian populist trend and, in particular, the dangerous intersection of authoritarian populism and ethnoreligious nationalism.

### **Hindutva, the BJP, and Indian Politics**

Upon Indian independence in 1947, many predicted democracy would not survive in the vast and diverse nation, with more than 15 major languages, conflicting religions, high levels of illiteracy, widespread poverty, and numerous isolated rural minorities (Guha, 2007). The partition of the British Raj into Pakistan and India created one Muslim and one Hindu majority state. While Pakistan became an Islamic republic, India established a particular brand of secularism. This secularism enshrined multiculturalism, rather than a separation of religion and state, as a cornerstone of democratic India (Jaffrelot, 2011). The constitutional commitment to secularism has been seen as crucial to India's ability to sustain democracy in the face of numerous axes of disparity (Lijphart, 1996). The establishment of Indian democracy and nationalism as explicitly secular is intimately intertwined with India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Indian National Congress (INC) party, which dominated Indian elections for the democracy's first 50 years. However, since 1996, the BJP joined the INC as a credible national party, both leading large coalitions in India's multiparty system.

The BJP advances a Hindu nationalist ideology, Hindutva, which rejects secularism and defines national identity in terms of Hindu religious identity (Jaffrelot, 1999). The ideology was first articulated in a 1923 pamphlet that argued that Hindus were not a religious community but a national and racial identity composed of the superimposition of religion, culture, language, and a sacred territory. This was developed in reaction to the pan-Islamic movement and viewed India's Muslim minority as a threat to a disunited Hindu majority (Jaffrelot, 2007).

The ideology was put into practice by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organization founded in 1925 to propagate Hindutva and strengthen the Hindu community (Jaffrelot, 2007). The BJP has close links to the RSS, being founded by RSS adherents in 1951 after the RSS was banned following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Modi spent many years working in senior management and organizational positions in the RSS before being assigned by the RSS to the BJP in 1985 (Pathak, 2001).

In 1997, a Supreme Court case paved the way for Hindu nationalist politics when it ruled Hindutva was a way of life synonymous with Indian nationalism, culture, and history, and separate from Hinduism as a religion (Saxena, 2018). This allowed politicians to advocate directly for Hindu votes, previously forbidden under laws to protect secularism (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018).

Modern Hindutva attempts to create an ideologically orientated, singular, and infallible history for both Hinduism and India (Udupa, 2016). As an ethnoreligious nationalism, Hindutva is intimately concerned with history, framing issues in historical rather than religious language, thereby casting Hindu mythology as factual history (Jaffrelot, 2008). Online communities play a key role in this ideologically driven history-making (Udupa, 2016), with the Internet also playing an important role in BJP electioneering. In 2014, social media and, in particular, Twitter were used to circumvent Modi's poor image in the mainstream media (Pal, Chandra, & Vydiswaran, 2016) and rebrand him as the "messiah of New India" (Udupa, 2018, p. 455).

### **Social Media and Ideology in (Indian) Political Campaigns**

A great deal of research has focused on the quality of online information and interaction, including demonstrating social media has facilitated echo chambers and filter bubbles (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Garimella, Morales, Gionis, & Mathioudakis, 2018; Pariser, 2012), a proliferation and mainstream influence of hyperpartisan content (Faris et al., 2017; Howard, Bolsover, Kollanyi, Bradshaw, & Neudert, 2017; Zannettou et al., 2017), and widespread opinion manipulation in political events (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Bolsover & Howard, 2019; Chadwick, 2013). The ability to bypass established media and political processes has benefited populist candidates (Kreis, 2017), and the political economies of the platforms favor extreme, emotive, and divisive content (Deibert, 2019). The vast majority of research, however, has focused on the discourse of political leaders and political parties or specific media outlets. Much less attention has been paid to how individuals are mobilizing or are mobilized behind authoritarian populist ideologies in online spaces.

This mobilizational quality is particularly important in India, with BJP strategy shifting to an exclusive focus on ethnoreligious mobilization in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Jaffrelot, 1999). Communal and political violence have been major issues, with some arguing "Hindu nationalist organizations deliberately promote communal violence" to build support and advance their interests (Qureshi, 2018, p. v). In 2002, while Modi was chief minister of Gujarat, riots in the state killed at least 1,000 people, mostly Muslims. Modi was accused of initiating and condoning the violence, but he was cleared after a Supreme Court investigation. However, analysis of 2016 towns and rural areas in Gujarat showed violence was highest in areas where the BJP would face the most intense competition in the coming elections and the BJP's vote share increased the most in areas that had seen the worst violence, potentially suggesting a political strategy behind these violent mobilizations (Dhattiwala & Biggs, 2012).

Pal et al. (2018) conducted a long-term analysis of Modi's Twitter account between 2009 and 2015, including the 2012 Gujarat election, which saw the reelection of Modi as chief minister, and the 2014 election, which saw Modi elected as prime minister of India. They found the high point of Hindutva-related content was between August and December 2012, the campaign period of the Gujarat election, and Modi's Twitter account transitioned in January 2013 from Hindutva to more secular Hindu-related messaging as he began to look toward national office and the need to appeal to the wider Indian population. Also examining Modi's Twitter account in the 2014 election, Bajaj (2017) found campaigning focused on development and governance issues, with Hindu nationalist content kept at the margins and Modi praising the party for adhering to this framing.

#### **2014–2019: A Return of Hindutva Mobilization?**

Victory in 2014 was the start, rather than the end, of the BJP's campaign. Between 2014 and 2019, the BJP tripled the number of states in which it held power and oversaw an entrenchment of Hindutva ideology in almost every aspect of public life (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018). In contrast to the public-oriented 2014 campaign (Ahmed, Jaidka, & Cho, 2016), after the election, the BJP pursued a "negative strategy of ridiculing and discrediting the opposition and polarizing the public along mostly religious lines" (Mahapatra, 2019, n.p.).

Work by Udupa (2016, 2018) has shown how volunteers, supporters, and regular citizens have been drawn into this discourse in two articles on the motivations and practices of Hindu nationalist volunteers after the 2014 election. In both articles, it is noteworthy how volunteers construct their actions as responses to a problem they are cocreating. Hindutva volunteers on Twitter, who selectively employ facts to construct ideologically driven histories, see their propaganda as part of the fight against propaganda. Similarly, Hindutva trolls see their cause as fighting ideological spin with rationalism: "We have the database of actual facts. Right wing is always right" (Udupa, 2016, p. 220).

However, despite the importance of individuals' mobilizations behind ethnoreligious nationalist and authoritarian populist discourses, almost all research on online discourse has focused on Modi's account (Bajaj, 2017; Pal et al., 2018) or official party accounts (Ahmed et al., 2016; Kanungo, 2015). We know much less about how and to what extent supporters are mobilized or are mobilizing online to advance dangerous ethnoreligious nationalism and authoritarian populism.

Analysis of the 2014 election found a BJP focus on development and governance, aided by a masterfully savvy use of technology (Bajaj, 2017; Das & Schroeder, 2020). However, with a perception that the BJP has failed to deliver on development and governance goals (Das & Schroeder, 2020), the party may have turned in 2019 to the religiously polarizing (and potentially deadly) political mobilizations that were seen in campaigns in Gujarat during Modi's time as chief minister. A *New York Times* article described how, in WhatsApp groups used by the BJP to coordinate and track volunteers, leaders distributed "dark warnings about Hindus being murdered by Muslims—including a debunked BJP claim that 23 activists were killed by jihadists" (Goel, 2018, para. 4). Regional social media were rife with misinformation and political propaganda; much of this information was later distributed on nationwide platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook (Bansal & Poonam, 2018). In addition to blatant falsehoods, social media posts in the lead-up to the election consistently aimed to polarize the electorate along a Hindu-Muslim divide (Bansal & Poonam, 2018).

However, this evidence comes from media reports, so there remains more research necessary to understand whether the 2019 election entailed a return of the BJP to overt ethnoreligious nationalism supported with authoritarian populist strategies and the extent to which individuals mobilized or were mobilized on social media to advance these ideologies. As such, this research addresses two linked questions:

*RQ1: What are the prevalence and sources of authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist discourses? In what ways are different users mobilized and mobilizing around these discourses?*

*RQ2: Did the BJP's campaign exceed normal political partisanship and demonstrate a use of authoritarian populist strategies to advance an ethnoreligious nationalist agenda?*

### **Collecting a Representative Sample of Pro-BJP Social Media Discourse**

As the largest open social media platform, Twitter is the most appropriate venue for studying online public discourse ecosystems. For the 2014 Indian election, it was used much more extensively than Facebook for party campaigning (Kanungo, 2015) and was the most popular social media platform for the

consumption of political information (Meti, Khandoba, & Guru, 2015). However, almost all analysis of social media data does not use representative samples, instead focusing on preselected key accounts or preselected hashtags. The first strategy can speak only to the discourse of the preselected users with limited ability to assess citizen resonance (through retweets or replies). The second strategy can provide a representative sample of discourse within preselected hashtags, but focuses on generic topics, missing grassroots-generated and emergent issues.

This project develops a novel strategy to construct a representative sample of new and popular Twitter discourse within a given locality. Using the Twitter API, the top 50 trending topics in all 22 places in India for which Twitter collates trending topics (including one for the entire country) are collected every 10 minutes. At the same time, the 100 most recent posts in each of these trending topics are collected, producing a data set representative of all discourse in trending topics in India during the study period.

This generates very large amounts of data, necessitating a relatively short analysis period. Thus, this project focuses on the final week of the election: May 13–19. The election was conducted in seven phases, with different states and regions voting between April 11 and May 19. Results are not counted or announced until after all votes are made. As such, this research can speak to discourse only in the final week of the election within Twitter trending topics. Most research privileges long time periods over wide reach, focusing on very limited cases over long timescales (e.g., Bajaj, 2017), or limited cases over medium timescales (e.g., Gul et al., 2016). To complement existing efforts, this research focuses on the analysis of a sample truly representative of online discourse over a weeklong period.

Across the week, 2,786,968 tweets were collected in 2,060 trends. Three coders coded all trends to identify those related to politics. Percentage agreement was 95%, with a kappa of 90%; 865 political trends were identified, with a total of 1,470,493 tweets collected in these trends. Two thousand tweets from these political trends were randomly selected and coded to ascertain whether they concerned politics and, if so, whether they were pro-BJP. Percentage agreement for political tweets was 94% with a kappa of 51%, and percentage agreement for partisan affiliation was 91% with a kappa of 51%. This identified 1,808 political tweets, of which 391 were pro-BJP, providing a representative sample of pro-BJP tweets on Twitter in India during the final week of the 2019 election.

### **Assessing Pro-BJP Speech With a Theoretically Grounded Framework**

The research questions imply two properties of interest: who is speaking, and does the speech evidence authoritarian populism and/or ethnoreligious nationalism? To ascertain who, the type of account posting the tweet, and, for retweets, the type of account being retweeted is coded using a scheme developed in previous research (Bolsover, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Of the 391 pro-BJP posts, 194 were made or were retweets of posts

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<sup>2</sup> (1) Regular individual; (2) public individual (such as a journalist, doctor, or religious leader whose account focuses on their professional identity); (3) celebrity; (4) political party; (5) politician; (6) political group (organized outside of a political party); (7) government department or publicly run entity; (8) business; (9) small business; (10) small group or content producer (e.g., a band); (11) professional news organization; (12) smaller professional news organization; (13) junk news organization; (14) blog or forum; (15) civic

made by political entities. This demonstrates that half of pro-BJP discourse is invisible to research focusing only on the posts of political parties and politicians (even if all participating politicians and political parties are included).

For authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist discourse, an inductive framing analysis is performed, informed by relevant theory. Populism's core themes are of an antagonist relationship between a pure people and a corrupt elite and that politics should be an expression of the direct will of the people (Mudde, 2007). Authoritarianism is characterized by limited political pluralism and the neutralization of political opponents (Linz, 2000). This is combined with emotional appeals to generic values: the need for strength, conformity, and loyalty to protect against easily recognizable social problems threatening disorder and instability (Linz, 1964; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In authoritarian populism, the people and elite of populist ideology are combined with the threatening other of authoritarian discourse (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019). Unlike regular authoritarianism, which has limited mobilization, authoritarian populism mobilizes individuals through the coalition of a strong, charismatic leader and key groups in society (Gasiorowski, 1990). From this literature, seven themes of authoritarian populism emerge: corrupt elite and pure people; politics as a direct expression of the will of the people; problems with democracy/pluralism; political legitimacy based on appeals to emotion; the need for strength to combat easily recognizable social problems; a single charismatic leader; and political mobilization.

This research also includes an eighth theme, ethnoreligious nationalism, an ideology that seeks to redefine the nation and nationality in terms of ethnicity and religion. Less theoretical work exists on ethnoreligious nationalism, as nationalism was long seen as explicitly secular (Smith, 2009). However, research on Hindutva as an ethnoreligious nationalism has theorized discursive strategies, including ideologically driven history making (Udupa, 2016) and the art of grievance (Jaffrelot, 2008).

Based on these eight themes, an inductive framing analysis is undertaken identifying the frames through which these themes surface in pro-BJP discourse (Table 1). Each frame is aligned to the theme to which it is most closely related. This breakdown is provided as a heuristic, rather than a fixed, categorization, as frames may overlap multiple themes. This is not an exhaustive categorization of all frames in pro-BJP online discourse but only those that align with the themes of authoritarian populism and ethnoreligious nationalism. Given its relevance in studies of the 2014 election, instances of a development frame are also coded.

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group; (16) nonprofit; (17) university or school; (18) spam or robot; (19) account made private since data collection; (20) account deleted since data collection; and (21) account suspended since data collection.

**Table 1. Frames and Themes of Authoritarian Populist and Ethnoreligious Nationalist Discourse.**

Populist frames	Authoritarian frames	Authoritarian populist frames	Ethnoreligious nationalist frames
<p><i>Theme: Corrupt elite and pure people</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delegitimation of political opponents</li> <li>• Corrupt media</li> <li>• Corrupt political elite</li> <li>• Electoral fraud</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: Problems with democracy/pluralism</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy is under threat</li> <li>• Unfairness against BJP supporters</li> <li>• Attacks against BJP</li> <li>• Violence being caused by BJP opposition</li> <li>• Democracy is a lie/corrupt</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: Single charismatic leader</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on Modi as a leader</li> <li>• Construction of leader-people relationship</li> <li>• Modi/BJP as common man in contrast to political elite</li> </ul>	<p><i>BJP as nationalist or nation building</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideologically driven history making</li> <li>• Art of grievance</li> <li>• Appeasement of Muslims/unfairness against Hindus</li> <li>• Religiously divisive labeling</li> <li>• Threats against Hindus (regular people)</li> <li>• Religious support of Hinduism for BJP or linkage of BJP with Hinduism</li> <li>• INC does not or cynically represents Hindus</li> <li>• Modi as a devout Hindu</li> </ul>
<p><i>Theme: Politics should be a direct expression of the will of the "people"</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Massive support among the people for the BJP</li> <li>• Politics should be a direct expression of the will of the "people"</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: Political legitimacy based on appeals to emotion</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verified misinformation</li> <li>• Country is in tatters/reclaim lost glory</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: Political mobilization</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calls for direct action</li> </ul>	
	<p><i>Theme: Strength necessary to combat easily recognizable social problems</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for strength</li> <li>• Violent language</li> <li>• Promotion of violence</li> <li>• Demonization of immigrants</li> <li>• Divisive language</li> <li>• Name-calling against citizens</li> </ul>		



### **High Levels of Authoritarian Populism and Ethnoreligious Nationalism**

In 2014, research analyzing Modi's Twitter account found development the main focus. However, only 9% of pro-BJP posts in 2019 had a development frame. In contrast, 60% had one or more populist frames, 47% one or more authoritarian frames, 44% one or more authoritarian-populist frames, and 38% one or more ethnoreligious nationalist frames (Table 2). In total, 88% of posts had at least one of the identified frames, demonstrating very high levels of authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist sentiment in pro-BJP discourse.

Although each identified frame is a hallmark of one of the theories of focus, it could be argued that some might be present in regular political partisanship. This is true of some common frames: delegitimization of political opponents (37%), focus on Modi as a leader (36%), massive support among the people for the BJP (25%), and the use of divisive language (24%). Discussion in the next sections, delving into the content of tweets, will demonstrate that discourse using these frames exceeds regular political partisanship.

However, other common frames would not be expected to be present in partisan democratic discourse. This includes allegations of corruption among political elite (26%) and threats to democracy (20%). The prevalence of ethnoreligious nationalist frames is also notable. Although each individual frame has a reasonably low prevalence (with threats against regular people [Hindus] highest at 11%), when analyzed together, ethnoreligious nationalist frames are present in more than one in three pro-BJP tweets. Ten percent of posts used an art of grievance strategy, 9% engaged in ideologically driven history making, 9% linked the BJP with Hinduism or implied religious support for the BJP, 6% constructed Modi as a devout Hindu, and 4% argued that the INC does not or cynically represents Hindus. These last four frames are notable as they reject the secular principles underpinning Indian democracy.

**Table 2. Prevalence of Authoritarian Populist and Ethnoreligious Nationalist Themes and Frames.**

Populist frames (60%)	Authoritarian frames (47%)	Authoritarian populist frames (44%)	Ethnoreligious nationalist frames (38%)
<p><i>Theme: Corrupt elite and pure people (42%)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delegitimation of political opponents (36%)</li> <li>Corrupt media (3%)</li> <li>Corrupt political elite (26%)</li> <li>Electoral fraud (4%)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: Problems with democracy/pluralism (30%)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Democracy is under threat (20%)</li> <li>Unfairness against BJP supporters (11%)</li> <li>Attacks against BJP (14%)</li> <li>Violence being caused by BJP opposition (12%)</li> <li>Democracy is a lie/corrupt (2%)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: Single charismatic leader (39%)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on Modi as a leader (36%)</li> <li>Construction of leader-people relationship (21%)</li> <li>Modi/BJP as common man in contrast to political elite (4%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BJP as nationalist or nation building (5%)</li> <li>Ideologically driven history making (9%)</li> <li>Art of grievance (10%)</li> <li>Appeasement of Muslims/unfairness against Hindus (4%)</li> <li>Religiously divisive labeling (4%)</li> <li>Threats against Hindus (regular people; 11%)</li> <li>Religious support of Hinduism for BJP or linkage of BJP with Hinduism (9%)</li> <li>INC does not or cynically represents Hindus (4%)</li> <li>Modi as a devout Hindu (6%)</li> </ul>
<p><i>Theme: Politics should be a direct expression of the will of the "people" (27%)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Massive support among the people for the BJP (25%)</li> <li>Politics should be a direct expression of the will of the "people" (2%)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: Political legitimacy based on appeals to emotion (6%)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verified misinformation (4%)</li> <li>Country is in tatters/reclaim lost glory (2%)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Theme: Political mobilization (9%)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Calls for direct action (9%)</li> </ul>	
	<p><i>Theme: Strength necessary to combat easily recognizable social problems (33%)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need for strength (8%)</li> <li>Violent language (9%)</li> <li>Promotion of violence (4%)</li> <li>Demonization of immigrants (1%)</li> <li>Divisive language (24%)</li> <li>Name-calling against citizens (5%)</li> </ul>		

Some frames common in the campaigns of authoritarian populists in other countries were rare. This includes allegations of electoral fraud (4%) and corrupt media (3%), the demonization of immigrants (1%), and claims that the country was in tatters and needed to regain lost glory (2%). This indicates the specificities of BJP authoritarian populism. Certain elements of contemporary authoritarian populism in commonly studied Western countries are replaced with ethno-religious nationalism in India, the demonization of immigrants as the external other is discursively replaced by the othering of a domestic Muslim minority, and the regaining of lost glory is replaced by ideologically driven history making.

### **A Cult of Personality Around Modi With BJP Politicians Stoking Extremism and Promoting Discourses of Threat**

Thirty-eight posts from Modi's Twitter account were captured via retweeting. Although 76% contained at least one populist frame and 50% at least one authoritarian populist frame (Table 3), this was driven largely by frames that appear compatible with partisan democratic discourse: massive support from the people for the BJP (58%), delegitimization of political opponents (26%), and focus on Modi as a leader (37%). Further, a notably smaller number of Modi's posts contained authoritarian and ethno-religious nationalist frames than general pro-BJP discourse. Ethno-religious nationalism in Modi's posts was characterized largely by expressions of himself as a devout Hindu and the linkage of the BJP and Hinduism (both 11%), rather than more negative frames such as alleging threats to regular people (Hindus) or appeasement of Muslims/unfairness against Hindus.

More than half of Modi's posts expressed gratitude: "Thank you Mathurapur for the immense love and affection. These scenes clearly show the bond of Bengal with BJP" (Modi, 2019a). There were some allegations of corruption of political elite (11%) and ideas that democracy was under threat (13%), for instance, alleging All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Mamata Banerjee was corrupt and a threat to democracy: "TMC is anti-development and anti-democracy" (Modi, 2019b) and "West Bengal isn't the private fiefdom of Didi (a nickname for Banerjee), her nephew, or TMC. West Bengal deserves representatives who serve the citizens of the state, not bow to diktats of a party" (Modi, 2019c). The idea of serving the citizens not bowing to a party demonstrates a leader-people connection that bypasses party politics. In notable contrast to BJP party discourse, all 38 of Modi's posts were in English, demonstrating an intention for wide appeal and a sidelining of Hindu nationalism.

In addition to the 52% of Modi's posts expressing thanks for the "love and affection" (Modi, 2019a) shown to him, 11% constructed him as a devout Hindu: "Prayed at the Kedarnath Temple. Everywhere Shiva" (Modi, 2019d). This presentation of a humble, religious leader is part of a wider personality cult around Modi in pro-BJP discourse, with 36% of all posts focusing on Modi as a leader and 21% on the leader-people relationship.

**Table 3. Prevalence of Overarching Frames Among Different Groups.**

	<i>N</i>	At least one authoritarian, populist, authoritarian populist, or ethnoreligious nationalist frame (%)	At least one populist frame (%)	At least one authoritarian frame (%)	At least one authoritarian populist frame (%)	At least one ethnoreligious nationalist frame (%)
All pro-BJP posts	391	88	60	47	44	38
Modi's Twitter posts	38	89	76	18	50	18
Modi's words posted by the BJP	22	95	83	45	73	41
BJP politicians (other than Modi)	87	91	66	55	37	38
Celebrities and public individuals	53	94	70	55	37	51
Regular individuals	91	83	48	41	49	39

Across the entire representative sample of 1.47 million posts in political trends in the final week of the 2019 election, #ApnaModiAayega (OurModiWillCome) was the fourth most prevalent hashtag and most common partisan hashtag; #HarGharModi (ModiInEveryHousehold) was the fifth most common.<sup>3</sup> Among the top 30 were also #DeshKaGauravModi (PrideOfTheCountryModi), #JeetegaToModiHi (OnlyModiWillWin), and #DeshModiKeSaath (CountryIsWithModi). These hashtags, which are used to structure Twitter discussions, build an explicit leader-people relationship. All five hashtags are in Hindi, suggesting an ethnoreligious nature to this relationship.

The focus on the country in PrideOfTheCountryModi and CountryIsWithModi demonstrates authoritarian and nationalistic themes, suggesting to be Indian is to support Modi and lack of support for Modi is un-Indian. Both PrideOfTheCountryModi and OurModiWillCome have strong elements of hero worship. OurModiWillCome demonstrates quasi-religious imagery of our (the populist people's) Modi coming as if long awaited (despite the fact that Modi is the incumbent). These hashtags exemplify the authoritarian populist hallmark of a strong, charismatic leader with a direct, emotional connection to the people (construed as Hindi-speaking). These expressions are supported and encouraged by the focus of Modi's account on

<sup>3</sup> Notably, it was not until the 29th most prevalent that there was an anti-BJP sentiment and not till 74th a pro-INC sentiment.

thanking people for their “immense love and affection” and the “bond with the BJP” this demonstrates (Modi, 2019a), as well as the self-presentation of Modi as a devout and humble Hindu who is, therefore, worthy of pride and worship.

However, Modi’s Twitter account, although most frequently studied, is not his only voice on the platform. A very different picture emerges in the way Modi is quoted and represented by BJP accounts. These accounts frequently post videos of Modi speaking, tweeting key quotes from speeches. There were 57 tweets written by official BJP Twitter accounts in the data set, of which 22 (38%) simply quoted Modi. The tones of these quotes are quite different from Modi’s account, with the delegitimizing of political opponents doubling from 26% on Modi’s Twitter account to 55% in his quoted speeches, allegations that democracy is under threat doubling from 13% to 27%, and accusations of a corrupt political elite quadrupling 11% to 50% (Table 4). Frames of threat against the BJP, BJP supporters, or regular individuals (Hindus) also quadrupled, from 5% in Modi’s Twitter posts to 23% in his speeches quoted on the BJP Twitter accounts. Underscoring the discursive difference, while all 38 of Modi’s tweets were in English, 21 of the 22 BJP quotes of Modi were in Hindi.

These frames also increased in detail and emotive salience. On corruption, Modi’s quoted speeches attacked “those born with a silver spoon” who considered the public their slaves (BJP, 2019a). He claimed one family had continually cheated India since independence (BJP Maharashtra, 2019). On threat, Modi claimed “The common man lived in fear” because of a corrupt justice system (BJP, 2019b); the (Indian National) “Congress wants to give openly complete freedom to stone pelters, terrorists and their supporters” (BJP, 2019c); and TMC leader Banerjee was sending “the sons and daughters of India” to jail for exercising their freedom of speech while allowing intruders and smugglers to operate freely (BJP, 2019d). This is typical of authoritarian populism with threats against the “common man” (BJP, 2019b) and the “the sons and daughters of India” (BJP, 2019d) from terrorists, smugglers, and intruders who are supported by a corrupt political elite, who enslave and exploit the public, confining them to a life of fear.

To address this threat, Modi’s speeches quoted by the BJP positioned him as aggressively fighting the sources of this fear, enlisting supporters to make this happen:

When you press the lotus button, it will take you five seconds, but I will spend my next five years for you. When you press the lotus button, not only will you press your finger, but you will also press the trigger to shoot terrorists in the chest (BJP, 2019e).

This is mobilizational language that construes an electoral vote as a proxy press of a gun’s trigger. Modi’s quoted speeches also established him as a hero fated to embody and represent India: “I was born to keep the shining image of my country in the world” (BJP, 2019f).

**Table 4. Prevalence of Key Authoritarian Populist Frames in Different Groups.**

	N	Populist		Authoritarian				Authoritarian populist			
		Corrupt political elite (%)	Delegitimation of political opponents (%)	Democracy is under threat (%)	Unfairness against BJP supporters (%)	Attacks against the BJP (%)	Violence is being caused by those who oppose the BJP (%)	Divisive language (%)	Focus on Modi as a leader (%)	Construction of leader-people relationship (%)	Need for strength (%)
All pro-BJP posts	391	26	37	20	11	14	12	24	36	21	8
Modi's Twitter	38	11	26	13	0	3	5	8	37	26	3
Modi's words posted by the BJP	22	50	55	27	0	5	5	18	73	41	9
BJP politicians (other than Modi)	87	37	43	27	18	29	29	30	73	41	7
Celebrities and public individuals	53	37	47	26	23	29	29	30	21	11	11
Regular individuals	91	18	29	10	3	9	8	25	42	25	9

When not quoting Modi or other BJP leaders, BJP accounts mostly focused on administrative information and generic slogans. However, they occasionally played into this ethno-religious nationalist cult of personality, with BJP4Rajistan writing: "With the orders and blessings of Shiva, the dream of renovation of Kashi (an ancient Indian kingdom) is coming true. Kashi said, Modi again" (BJP Rajasthan, 2019). Interestingly, although this post comes from the (verified) account of the Rajasthan BJP, an identical (original) post was also made by what appeared to be a fake account claiming to be the chief minister of Gujarat. Neither of these posts was a retweet of the other. This sentiment, promoted by both the BJP and seemingly fraudulent accounts, is a clear example of ethno-religious nationalist discourse combined with an authoritarian frame of regaining lost glory. The idea that Modi's election represents the wishes of Shiva indicates a profoundly religious element of BJP campaigning, exceeding the idea of Hindutva as a way of life separate from religion. It is important to note the sense of threat created for non-Hindus through this post: If Modi's leadership is based on the orders on Shiva to establish a new kingdom of Kashi, what place for religious minorities in this new India?

The differences between Modi's Twitter account and his (self-)presentation in speeches quoted by BJP accounts establish a dual identity of a humble, pious individual and religiously endorsed hero destined to establish a new India. This creates a discursive ecosystem that Modi is able to simultaneously rise above and push forward. The construction of a personality cult around Modi was also advanced by BJP politicians, with 73% of posts focusing on Modi as a leader and 41% constructing the leader-people relationship.

Within the data set, there were 86 tweets by BJP politicians other than Modi. Similar to Modi's tweets, they showed high levels of accusations that democracy was under threat (27%) and the political elite were corrupt (36%; Table 4). However, posts from BJP politicians much more frequently used divisive language (30%, compared with 8% of Modi's tweets and 18% of BJP quotes of Modi's words). BJP politicians' posts also more frequently used frames of threat (33%, compared with 5% of Modi's tweets and 23% of BJP quotes of Modi's words). BJP politicians' posts had the same frequency as quotes from Modi's speeches of alleging threats to democracy (27%) and threats to regular Indians (Hindus; 18%). However, BJP politicians also frequently advanced frames of threat that were not present or were rare in Modi's words: alleging attacks against the BJP (29%), violence being caused by those who oppose the BJP (28%), and unfairness against BJP supporters (18%; Table 4). This creates a victim narrative for the BJP that complements discourses of a corrupt political elite and a religiously endorsed hero leader (and his followers), encircled by enemies on all sides.

Fourteen percent of BJP politicians' posts used the slogan Jai Shri Ram (Glory to Lord Rama), which has been weaponized as a Hindu nationalist battle cry, including in a number of violent and deadly incidents (Associated Press, 2020; British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2019). At this point in the campaign, the slogan was directed against Banerjee, who opposes the slogan as mixing religion and politics. A widely shared video from May 4, 2019, showed her getting out of a campaign car to try to talk to individuals shouting the slogan, and she is heard muttering a mocking term as the individuals run away rather than approach her to talk. There was significant mobilization around this slogan to attack Banerjee, with BJP spokesperson Tajinder Bagga claiming to distribute 1 million pre-addressed postcards for people to write the slogan on and send to her (Bagga, 2019a). In another post, Bagga encourages supporters in Kolkata to come write Jai Shri Ram and a message for Banerjee on a 100-foot

poster (Bagga, 2019b). #MamataDidiJaiShriRam was the 72nd most common political hashtag in India in the final week of the election.

This case of mobilization of ethnoreligious nationalism is part of a wider ecosystem of BJP discourse focused on establishing ideas of threats to Indians (understood as Hindus), the BJP (understood as the representative of Hindus and true India), and Indian democracy (understood as a Hindu nationalist state). These posts from BJP politicians, at times, went very far beyond normal political partisanship. Going further than the 27% of BJP posts arguing democracy was under threat, BJP politician Tejasvi Surya even implied that the foundations of democracy itself are corrupt: "Constitutionalism, federalism, rule of law are just mere shields that the naxals (communists) use to hoodwink the general public. They will kill you when they can, unrepentantly. Just see how this naxalite is defending Mamta's blood hungry politics" (Surya, 2019).

Only 2% of posts used the democracy is a lie/corrupt frame. However, these ideas being promoted by a BJP politician is worrying for Indian democracy and casts a new light on the large number of BJP posts suggesting democracy is under threat. It is not just a corrupt political elite that is antidemocracy, but the structures of liberal democracy itself are the enemies of the general public. This suggests the BJP was not only claiming to save existing Indian democracy but also pursuing a redefinition of what Indian democracy is and means. With 49% of pro-BJP posts from regular individuals exhibiting at least one authoritarian populist frame and 38% at least one ethnoreligious nationalist frame, these messages clearly have resonance with supporters.

### **Celebrities and Public Individuals Extending Ethnoreligious Nationalist Extremism; Individuals Look to Authoritarian Leader Modi**

The most prevalent type of pro-BJP post is individuals' retweets of the posts of BJP politicians or the BJP. More than one-third of posts (140) take this form. As such, the vast majority of discourse already examined is a form of mobilization: an individual action to propagate the words of political entities. However, what is unique about this research is that it examines pro-BJP messages created by all users. Twenty-three percent of pro-BJP posts are written by individual supporters and 14% by celebrities and public individuals.<sup>4</sup> However, the voices of celebrities and public individuals have much larger reach, with, on average, 18 times more retweets per post than those of regular individuals.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of celebrities and public individuals contrasts with that of news organizations. Nine percent of pro-BJP posts were retweets of posts made by celebrities and public individuals; only 3% were retweets of media organizations of any type (including small-scale, online, and hyperpartisan outlets). In contrast, 10% of the 2,000 political posts of any or no partisan affiliation were retweets of media organizations. This diminished role for news media is in line with populist theories and practices; the role of

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<sup>4</sup> Public individuals are users with public positions, such as journalists, doctors, authors, and businesspeople, who use their accounts as platforms for their public positions and have online followings exceeding those of regular users.

<sup>5</sup> Pro-BJP posts of celebrities or public individuals received 1,520 retweets on average, compared with 85 for regular individuals.



news media in mediating political information is circumvented, with direct politician-to-people communication and celebrities and public individuals taking on important roles in disseminating and advancing BJP messaging. This is clear evidence of a pro-BJP information ecosystem that deviates from the democratic norm in structure (as well as content). This is not true of general political discourse on Twitter, with Asia News International, Republic, Times Now, and NDTV all among the top 15 most retweeted users in the wider data set of 1.47 million political tweets.

Furthermore, pro-BJP celebrities and public individuals expressed the most extreme ideologies, with 94% of posts containing at least one authoritarian populist or ethnoreligious nationalist frame. Over half contained an ethnoreligious nationalist frame, much higher than the other groups examined (Table 3); 21% of their posts alleged threats to regular people (Hindus), 19% engaged in the art of grievance, and 11% undertook ideologically driven history making. This propels forward frames common in BJP discourse. However, celebrities and public individuals also advanced frames with little or no prevalence in BJP discourse, with 9% using religiously divisive labeling, 8% alleging appeasement of Muslims/unfairness against Hindus, and 6% claiming that the INC does not represent or cynically represents Hindus (Table 5).

The most prominent celebrity/public individual was actress Koena Mitra, who at the time had 210,000 followers. Mitra's was the seventh most retweeted account in the entire collected data set of 1.47 million political tweets (after, in order, the BJP, Modi, Asia News International, Gandhi, the INC, and Republic media). In one post that was retweeted by more than 1,000 users on Twitter, she pleads for president's rule to fight Banerjee in West Bengal, which she claims is "burning because of TMC goons" (Mitra, 2019a). This evidences the authoritarian theme of justifying the need for strength to fight an easily recognizable enemy. In another post (which again had more than 1,000 retweets on Twitter), she claims Indians live in fear after Congress' rule supported terrorists, using the hashtag #JihadistsGoToHell (Mitra, 2019b).

**Table 5. Prevalence of Key Ethnoreligious Nationalist Frames in Different Groups.**

	N	Ideologically driven history making (%)	Art of grievance (%)	Threats against regular people (Hindus) (%)	"Appeasement" of Muslims, unfairness against Hindus (%)	INC does not or cynically represents Hindus (%)	Religious support of Hinduism for BJP or linkage of BJP with Hinduism (%)	Religiously divisive labeling (%)	BJP as nationalism or nation building (%)
Modi's Twitter	38	3	5	3	0	0	11	0	0
Modi's words posted by the BJP	13	18	5	18	0	0	9	0	18
BJP politicians (other than Modi)	86	3	19	18	5	3	8	2	5
Celebrities and public individuals	47	11	19	21	8	6	6	9	4
Regular individuals	63	10	8	7	6	1	9	3	6

In another post, she appears to be sharing information about a video that was shown to be false by fact-checkers (Chandra, 2019). In the post, she claims “illegal immigrants are burning houses and killing Hindus” in the West Bengal town of Diamond Harbor, saying “throw all illegal immigrants from Mamta’s jihad den, India does not need them!!!” (Mitra, 2019c). These posts build on and complement Modi’s words in quoted speeches discussed in the previous section. The plea for president’s rule to defend a burning Bengal showcases a public crying out for Modi to “press the trigger to shoot terrorists in the chest” (BJP, 2019f). Mitra’s assertion that Indians live in fear because Congress’ rule supported terrorists replicates Modi’s arguments about how the “common man” lives in fear because of corruption in governance.

However, in line with the results of the framing analysis, Mitra’s posts take ethnoreligious nationalism further, with the use of jihadi (rather than terrorist) and illegal immigrant (rather than intruder). This language stokes dangerous ethnoreligious nationalism in its characterization of Muslims, who were accused of killing Hindus in the referenced misinformation, as illegal immigrants. This others them as not only not Indian but also as having no right to be in the country, a sentiment that attempts to refashion Indian national identity along ethnoreligious nationalist lines. The post by Mitra disseminating threatening misinformation about attacks on Hindus by Muslims was the fifth most prominent post in the entire representative of 1.47 million political tweets in the final week of the election. This demonstrates the reach and salience of these messages, amplified by online opinion leaders and the way individuals mobilize to propagate them.

However, the posts of regular users also show notable discursive differences. Posts written by regular users had a much lower prevalence of populist frames (48%). They also less frequently posted using frames of threat. Individuals may have internalized and been motivated by these messages of threat; they retweet posts about threats in large numbers (as the above example shows), but they do not directly advance them as frequently in their own posts in support of the BJP.

Instead, regular individuals’ posts focused on Modi as a leader (42%) and the construction of the leader-people relationship (25%). In keeping with the sentiment of the common hashtags analyzed, these tweets often explicitly bypassed the BJP as a party: “Countrymen remember . . . !!! History will always remember that one single person fought from the entire 543 opposition seats . . . he is the watchman @narendramodi!!!” (personal communication, May 19, 2019) and “This election is not being fought by the BJP, but by the people of India” (personal communication, May 14, 2019).<sup>6</sup> The watchman fighting the entire opposition evidences strong elements of hero worship and a cult of personality. One poster went even further, likening Modi to the gods of the first age of the Hindu world cycle and Congress politicians who disturb Modi’s meditation to the demons who disrupted the gods (personal communication, May 18, 2019).

These posts reach directly back to Modi’s Twitter account’s focus on expressing thankfulness and establishing the idea of an outpouring of love and support for him by the people as well as constructing himself as a devout Hindu. This direct connection established through Modi’s Twitter profile, common hashtags, and regular supporters’ discourse can structurally explain why key frames advanced by both BJP

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<sup>6</sup> To protect the privacy of regular individuals, their tweets, although publicly available, are referenced as private communications.

politicians and opinion leaders are rarely present in regular users' posts and why regular users' posts resemble more strongly Modi's speeches and online presence.

However, it is important also to note that while regular supporters' discourse evidenced lower rates, it is still the case that 39% contained at least one ethnoreligious nationalist frame. In particular, 9% suggested religious support for the BJP or linked the BJP with Hinduism, replicating BJP discourse. Six percent also used the frame of the INC not representing or cynically representing Hindus, which is rarer in BJP discourse, and promoted most prominently by celebrities and public individuals.

These lower rates, however, can be explained by understanding these regular supporters as the subjects of the terror narrative. They are the "common man" (BJP, 2019b), "the sons and daughters of India" (BJP, 2019d), who are being told they live in fear. As such, they are less likely to further promote these messages about the (ethnoreligious) problem and more likely to turn to the (authoritarian populist) religiously endorsed hero leader Modi to implement the (ethnoreligious) solution. The ethnoreligious nationalist messages and environments of threat constructed in the posts of the BJP and prominent supporters create a sense of urgency over the need for the prophesied hero of Modi to deliver Indians from this threat. To do this, Indians need not just passively vote but they also need to mobilize behind the BJP by using their vote to pull the trigger on terrorists. As one regular user tweeted: "Wake up Hindus, wake up, otherwise complete destruction is certain" (personal communication, May 14, 2019).

### **Conclusion: A Discursive Ecosystem Using Authoritarian Populist Strategies to Advance an Ethnoreligious Nationalist Agenda**

Pro-BJP discourse on Twitter in the final week of the 2019 election was replete with authoritarian populist and ethnoreligious nationalist ideas. This discourse used authoritarian populist strategies to construct an ethnoreligious problem with an ethnoreligious nationalist solution. Typical of authoritarianism, the problem is constructed as one of threat to democracy, the BJP, BJP supporters, and regular Indians (understood as Hindus). This threat is ascribed to a corrupt political elite (typical of populism). However, this has an ethnoreligious nationalist dimension, with the corrupt political elite presented as pandering to Muslims, exploiting Hindus, and collaborating with terrorists, jihadis, and illegal immigrants.

Typical of authoritarian populism, Modi is presented as the one to address this problem, a single charismatic leader who connects directly to the people. However, this construction also has an overtly ethnoreligious nationalist dimension, with Modi a hero figure, on the one hand, devout and humble and, on the other hand, endorsed and commanded by gods, destined to remake India in the glory of an imagined old. Typical of authoritarian discourse, the presented solution is vague and highly emotive—to keep the light of India shining in the world, to shoot the terrorists in the chest, to renovate the kingdom of Kashi. However, these proposed solutions to the constructed ethnoreligious problems take a clearly ethnoreligious, nationalist tone, refashioning Indian democracy and nationalism along ethnoreligious lines.

These discourses are not equally distributed, however, but part of a discursive ecosystem, demonstrating the limitations of examining any single part in isolation. Modi's own Twitter account directly connects to people with a humble, pious, and thankful presentation. This is mirrored in supporters'

own idealizations of Modi that frequently overlook party politics, focusing on a heroic leader-people relationship that exceeds the democratic functioning of political office. The Modi of the campaign trail, presented by the BJP, is different, exhibiting the full expression of ethnoreligious nationalist problem and solution, advanced with authoritarian populist strategies. This may be because, at the time, Modi had 47 million Twitter followers, compared with 11 million followers of the main BJP account, necessitating a more apparently benign presentation for this broader follower base. However, while Modi's Twitter account looks relatively benign on its own, when examined as part of a wider discursive ecosystem, it forms a major part of establishing a personality cult around Modi, specifically because of this humble and pious online self-presentation.

The follower base of individual BJP politicians is even more concentrated on those who already support the party's messages than the BJP party accounts. They not only strongly put forward messages of an ethnoreligious nationalist problem and solution, and a devout, religiously endorsed authoritarian populist leader to deliver it, but also develop additional lines of threat. As the followers of BJP politicians will likely already be supporters of the BJP, these politicians advance a victim narrative of violent threats from a corrupt political system against the BJP and its supporters that effectively others the opposition as enemies rather than a democratic model of working with political opponents.

Although commonly present in general political discourse on Twitter, the influence of news media is limited within the pro-BJP ecosystem. In their place, BJP-supporting celebrities and public individuals use their positions to strongly advance messages of ethnoreligious nationalism, including instances of widely circulated, religiously polarizing misinformation about Muslims attacking Hindus. Although these individuals have often expressed similar sentiments in other forums, the economics of social media help drive these extreme and dangerous expressions. Emotive, divisive posts about shocking revelations and imminent threats thrive in conditions of scarce attention, in which success is quantified by forwards and followers. While political entities use Twitter as a means to an end (election and governance), for online influencers (even those with successful offline careers), expanding their online profiles through follows and forwards is generally the goal of their use of the platform. This can create a cyclical system in which extreme ethnoreligious nationalist content thrives in Modi's India. Those participating in this discourse, whether for ideological or instrumental reasons, or both, then accelerate a system in which more interest and acceptance are created for this content.

Regular BJP supporters are mobilized to propagate the full expression these messages (as the data set is overwhelmingly constituted of retweets by users rather than examining data at the site of posting). No evidence of retweeting as critique was found in the data set and, thus, it is presumed that this forwarding is evidence of support of this construction of problem and solution. In their own posts, regular supporters focus on Modi and their relationship to Modi in a way that bypasses the BJP. In structure as well as form, therefore, pro-BJP discourse in the final week of the 2019 election campaign significantly deviates from what would be considered healthy within partisan democratic discourse.

The structures, formats, and political economies of social media platforms, like Twitter, favor these political ideologies and strategies over the collaborative, respectful, fact-based communications that support liberal democracies. Social media allow new types of campaigning and messaging that directly connect

leaders with citizens (facilitating populism) and the bypassing of traditional media, which provide checks on one-sided, incorrect, and extremist messaging. The lack of traditional media in pro-BJP messaging and the 50% of posts made by nonpolitical entities suggest Twitter is not just a space in which existing discourses are reproduced, but a place in which ideologies are articulated, developed, and advanced. Research using social media data will always struggle to show that these online discourses have offline implications. However, it is clear that the discourses uncovered here are mirrored in wider society; 55% of Indians believe autocratic rule would be a good way of running a country (higher than any other nation surveyed) and list the top three domestic issues as crime, terrorism, and corruption (Stokes, Manevich, & Chwe, 2017).

Although this study can speak only to pro-BJP discourse in trending topics on Twitter in India in the final week of the 2019 election campaign, it is clear that within this population an authoritarian populist campaign centered on familiar themes of political corruption, threat, and a single, charismatic leader was being used to advance an ethnoreligious nationalist agenda. This significantly exceeded ideas of Hindutva as a culture and way of life, separate from religion, and posed a danger to the secular foundations of Indian democracy as well as its religious, and particularly Muslim, minorities.

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- BJP. [@BJP4India]. (2019e, May 17). आप जब कमल का बटन दबाएंगे, तब आपको तो पांच सेकंड लगेंगे, लेकिन मैं अपने अगले पांच साल आपके लिए खपा दूंगा। आप जब कमल का बटन दबाएंगे, तब वो सिर्फ आप उंगली नहीं दबाएंगे बल्कि आप आतंकवादियों के सीने ... [When you press the lotus button, it will take you five seconds, but I will spend my next five years for you. When you press the lotus button, not only will you press your finger but you will also press the trigger to shoot terrorists in the chest: PM Modi #Country'sPrideModi] [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1129356892013154304>
- BJP. [@BJP4India]. (2019f, May 13). हमारी छवि किसी अखबार या पीआर एजेंसी ने नहीं बनाई है। हमने मिट्टी फांकते हुए, जमीन पर काम करते हुए जनता के दिल में जगह बनाई है। मोदी न अपनी छवि के लिए पैदा हुआ है, न अपनी छवि के ... [Our image has not been created by any newspaper or PR agency. We have made a place in the hearts of the people by digging the soil, working on the land. Modi was neither born for his image nor lived for his image. I was born to keep the shining image of my country in the world: PM #TheCountryIsWithModi] [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1127962957436952576>
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- BJP Rajasthan. [@BJP4Rajasthan]. (2019, May 17). भोले बाबा के आदेश और आशीर्वाद से काशी के जीर्णोद्धार का सपना साकार हो रहा है। काशी बोले, मोदी दोबारा! #DeshKaGauravModi [With the orders and blessings of Shiva, the dream of renovation of Kashi is coming true. Kashi said, Modi again. #Country'sPrideModi] [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1129311605152346112>
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