A Comparison of Internet Based Populism in India and China

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Our world—online and networked—is immersed under a wave of populism; populism spreads on the wings of internet. Internet as a media platform is essentially different from the traditional media platforms witnessed so far. Internet and digital media inherently follow bottom-up approach whereas traditional media adapt top-down approach to connect with its audience. Similarly, gatekeepers of internet are very different from traditional media. Internet platforms offer an agency to the common man to express his opinions which were never possible before. This shall definitely have political ramifications. India has witnessed religious-Hindu populism under BJP-NDA government since 2014. Recent elections confirm that this trend is likely to continue for next five years. It aims to present a stronger India which gives fitting reply to terrorist outfits and thus is in a better position to safeguard Mother India. It also aims to go back to its ancient roots something which was ruptured under the process of modernization under Nehru. In China the aim of populism is to re-achieve what it had in its glorious past—number one position in Asia—which can be inferred as China Dream. This populism is based on Confucian values and insists on its party-state to take strong measures especially towards US's anti-China moves. But, in China any comments which question the legitimacy of the party-state are deemed unpatriotic and removed from the online platforms. Chinese populism is against elite corruption. Populism in China can be referred as CCP guided populism.

Keywords: populism, digital media, India, China

The world has seen a revival of populism which was most prominently uncovered by two events in the West—Donald Trump being elected to power in the US and Brexit in 2016. Since then the popularity of populism has never quite receded. On the contrary, it is spreading to engulf a much larger part of the world. However, the nature and characteristics of populism varies across countries and regions. "Far from being immune to the symptoms of populism, Asia has the affliction in chronic form. But whereas populist nationalism in the West is generally anti-establishment, across most of East Asia it is the establishment" (Vickers, 2017, p. 59).

Since the time Narendra Modi sworn in as Prime Minister of India in 2014, there has been a hue and cry both internationally as well as domestically about India turning rightist; that India's secular traditions are being replaced by increasing in-tolerance in its society; its minority-Muslims are being relegated to second class citizens; there is coming back of cultural conservatism in general and domination by upper class Hindu nationalists in institutions in particular. There are allegations that Mr. Modi is tearing away the secular cloth enwrapping India which was the result of conscious efforts of India's first Prime Minster Jawaharlal Nehru. India witnessed an unabated rise in lynching of those accused of cow slaughter or eating beef. Criticisers of

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Modi blame it on his rule and this covert approval to these incidents. But what goes amiss in these news headlines is what brought Modi to the scene in 2014 and back again in 2019 with much larger share of votes? Why common man feels a connection, an implicit bond with Modi despite he being ridiculed by elites/intellectuals world over. What binds Indians together in support of Modi despite their religious, caste, and other divisions? What role do digital media which are used extensively by Modi in his campaigns play?

China, with Xi Jinping at its helm, saw enormous emphasis on rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and realization of the Chinese Dream (zhongguo meng 中国梦). This officially meant building moderately prosperous China in all respects. Xi Jinping in his address to NPC on 17 March 2013 called for building "rich, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious socialist country" with each term expressing a meaning specific to Chinese context. China wants to reclaim its position as number one in the world by going back to its past which essentially means a leader in Asia and later in the world. Why is it that Chinese people feel so strongly about going back to its ancient past and realising the Chinese Dream? What ties the multiethnic Chinese nation together towards forging ahead the economic path and soon becoming the largest economy of the world? How effectively have Chinese people and the government used digital media for achieving the Chinese Dream?

Populism-Entangled Definition

The answers to both the cases of India and China can be explored through populism. There is a ubiquitous belief among scholars that the world is slowly being in the grip of populism—be it President Trump's America First policy, Europe with Brexit referendum and 11 other countries run by populist governments, and India under Modi and China's Xi Jinping as its first populist president. The reasons, nature, and the context of rise of populism differ in each country.

Populism was first used in American newspapers in 1891 and 1892 in the political movements of Southern and Western America against politicians in Washington (Howen, 2013). The term populism is also associated with Narodnik students' movement of Russia who attempted to overthrow the Tsarist regime but was nonetheless unsuccessful. What both the above instances cited had in common was an appeal to "the people" to oppose the established and entrenched authorities and that politics needs to be conducted keeping the interests of common people in mind. Anti-establishment sentiments were combined with strong nationalist pride.

From late 1950s we see rise of scholarship on populism and thus a plethora of definitions of populism emerging. Allcock writes that the term populism has changed its connotations throughout its lifetime and this change in emphasis and lack of consistency in its use themselves tells us something about the phenomenon (Allock, 1971). Populism is one of the looser concepts of political science and consensus evades even on basic definition and usefulness of the concept. Meaning of populism remains imprecise. Is populism an ideology or it a movement or a mere style of running governments of some of the leaders. What are the boundaries of populism? How is populism related to other related concepts like-nationalism, socialism, Maoism? So the first thing we can agree on is the fact that populism can be categorized as what W. B. Gallie calls as "'essentially contested', concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie, 1956, p. 169). Kornhauser associates negative connotations with populism where he equates it with mass society and completely opposite to the concept of pluralism. "A central aim of his study is to distinguish between mass tendencies and pluralistic tendencies in modern society, and to show how pluralism, but not mass conditions, supports liberal democracy" and along with this "a second aim of his study is to show how variations in the character of the individual's social relations influence his receptivity or

resistance to the appeals of totalitarianism" (Kornhauser, 1977, p. 15). Robert A. Dahl introduces the term "populist democracy" where government guarantees political equality and absolute sovereignty of the majority (Dahl, 2006). Ernesto Laclau in his book *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism and Populism* develops a new theoretical approach to study populism. He points out to four basic approaches to study populism; three of these approach it simultaneously as a movement and an ideology, the fourth one studies in purely ideological terms (Laclau, 1977). There was a conference at London School of Economics in 1967 with the aim to define populism which resulted in an edited volume by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner. It sought to answer questions such as "Is populism primarily an ideology?"; "Could populism be described in terms of political psychology?"; "Was populism characterized by negativism—anti-capitalistic, anti-urban?"; "Did populism worship the people?". The book ended up not with a single definition but explaining the various meanings associated with populism and diversity of their usages (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969). Peter Wiles writes about populism "its ideology is loose, and attempts to define it exactly arouse derision and hostility" (Wiles, 1969, p. 167). However, he in his essay titled *A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine* does come out with a definition—"populism is any creed or movement based on the following major premise: virtue resides in simple people, who are overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions" (Wiles, 1969, p. 166). Weyland defines populism "as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland, 2001, p. 15). Pierre Ostiguy in his socio-cultural approach to study populism defines populism as "flaunting of the low"; the centrality of leadership is recognized but populism is not treated as an exclusively "top-down" phenomenon, instead it is regarded as a two-way phenomenon (Ostiguy, 2017). This kind of populism pays particular attention to rapport of the leaders which is in sync with culturally "low" in politics and populist represent people "as in" (Ostiguy, 2017). Cas Muddle categorizes populism as an ideology and defines it as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonte generale (general will) of the people" (Muddle, 2004, p. 543).

Since this concept lacks clear boundaries and is imprecise, there is a proliferation of definitions and approaches to study populism. So we adopt a minimal definition of populism where we define it in loose terms which shall result in its parsimonious conceptualization that can serve as a basis to study any kind of populism and then come up with specific definitions for India and China. Mudde who defines populism as "thin-centered ideology" calls for "a minimal conceptual approach that involves as few necessary conditions as possible (Muddle, 2004, p. 544). Thus, this minimal definition of populism sees populism as a phenomenon which is pro-people, anti-elite, or anti-establishment and has the other which is portrayed as the enemy.

Populism as experienced in India can be categorized under populism as a socio-cultural approach. India has witnessed a highly personalized style of leadership that more often than not bypasses the democratic institutions to build a direct connection between a leader and the public. Populism in India—as elsewhere—is seen as distribution of subsidies and sops to various social classes as a means to build an image of a leader who is pro-people and this in turn helps enhance leader's popularity which gets translated in increased share of votes during elections. The association of the leader with its people is majorly based on cultural roots which helps maintain political power of the leader by cutting down on capacity of institutions. India did not begin its independent political journey on populist lines. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru strengthened democratic institutions and rigidly followed parliamentary system. It was under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi

that India saw its first wave of populism coloured by socialism. Under Prime Minister Charan Singh, populism took forward the cause of peasants and rural dwellers against urban and industrial elite. Thus India saw the beginning of populism as an anti-establishment politics in 1960s (Jaffrelot, 2017). Later, India saw Hindutva based populism where it was not anti-establishment defined in socio-economic terms but anti-establishment defined in cultural terms. The people here include "the Hindus" blurring the divisions of class and caste among them. Politically the cause of Hindus was taken up by the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) translated as Indian People's Party. L. K. Advani, president of the party in 1990s became a huge Hindutva icon because of his Rath Yatra (chariot tour) of India demanding demolition of Babri Masjid (Mosque) in the city of Ayodhya, considered to be the birth place of Lord Ram, and building a temple dedicated to Lord Ram in its place. The command of BJP was handed over to Narendra Modi, the populist leader par excellence. During his tenure as the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, he projected himself as leader who lays emphasis on economic growth and development. It is under his leadership that "things get done". His personalized style of leadership believed in over-ruling intermediaries. He has made extensive use of digital technology to reach wider audiences. His rallies in the maidans (ground for conducting political rallies) were combined with "high-tech" modes of communication.

The ideological foundations of populism in China can be traced back to the May Fourth Movement and New Cultural Movement of 1919; the movement represented a shift from the classical Confucian tradition which never had prioritized the people over elites (Townsend, 1977). Perry traces the origin of Chinese Populism (minben sixiang 民本思想) to Mencius (Perry, 2015). Populism is not entirely new to Chinese culture; certainly major portions of Chinese culture were elitist but it did have some elements in terms of folk tradition (Townsend, 1977). Chairman Mao Zedong made a substantial contribution to the growth and development of Chinese populism with his political theory—the Mass Line, institutions supporting Mass Line, his principles of egalitarianism. The term "Mass Line" (qunzhong luxian 群众路线) was coined by Communist Party leader Li Lisan in 1928 (Tang, 2016). In the article "Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership" Mao wrote,

> In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses." This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of such ideas in action. (Mao, 1967, p. 119)

Mass Line can be described as "coming from the masses and going to the masses", which called on grass roots opinion to policies and sought active support in carrying the said policies. Mass line also required officials to be in sync with the common man and refrain from exhibiting any sense of superiority. Thus with Mass Line becoming a legitimate government principle, populism is slowly becoming an innate quality of Chinese political process. Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward are examples of Mao putting his populist policies at the forefront even at the cost of established institutions and bureaucracy. Institutions of Mass Line as identified by Townsend are mass campaigns, a decentralized administrative system, and popular political study and criticism (Townsend, 1977). Mass campaigns stand in contrast to the routine administrative style of governance and are wary of bureaucratic way of administration. As for egalitarianism, Mao believed that "virtue resides in the simple people and their collective traditions" as opposed to scholarly elite in Confucian

China. Thus populism in China is categorized under populism as a political-strategic approach as enunciated by Weyland. Mass Line can be seen as Maoist strategy to use populism as an ideology.

The Coming of Digital Populism

We are living in network society (Castells, 2010). This network society emerged as a result of immense changes in technology, economics, and culture. A fundamental feature of network society is virtuality.

> The shift from traditional mass media to a system of horizontal communication organized around the Internet and wireless communication has introduced a multiplicity of communication patterns at the source of a fundamental cultural transformation, as virtually becomes an essential dimension of our reality. (Castells, 2010, p. 323)

Humans have always formed networks of association, but what we observe these days is digital networks in Information Age. These digital networks can overcome the limitations of traditional networks; digital networks have the potential of endless expansion and reconfiguration. Majorly the internet is accessed through wireless devices. The internet has become the sole communication fabric of our lives—for work, for information, for entertainment, for politics, and for religion. As a result, a real virtuality becomes part of everyday life. "Mass-self communication" a term coined by Castells is very much part of virtual reality. Digital media landscape shapes and is in turn shaped by political process besides other phenomena like capitalism, gender relations, ideologies which are not relevant for the present context.

Mass media are the means through which messages and symbols are communicated to the general populace—it essentially conveys information and is one way—from sender to the receiver or to an audience. It is their function to instill the populace with values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will homogenize them with the institutional structures of the state and the larger society. Interpersonal media are about communication between one-to-one or one-to-many and are originally a feedback mechanism. Traditional media can be categorized under mass media whereas digital media—the internet and social media have features of both mass media and interpersonal media and can be categorized as hybrid media. Digital media—the internet and the social media are dominated by user-generated content which is not the case for traditional media. Traditional media follow much stringent filters and only after successive filters, only the cleansed residue is available for audience. Whereas in digital media these very filters are non-existent or very weak. The upside of such a mechanism is that it offers every individual to express his opinions and suggestions and goes out his frustrations. Digital media offer opportunities for both information and communication which is not the case with traditional media. Internet and social media have been termed in different ways—as citizens' media by Clemencia Rodriguez, as independent media by Noam Chomsky and Ed. Herman, as community media by Ellie Rennie, Nick Jankowski, and others, as alternative media by Chris Atton and others, as tactical media by Geert Lovink, as participatory media by Alfonso Gumucio and Jan Servaes (Downing, 2007). Just like technology such as television had overwhelming effect on political structures and process and public life, it is fair to assume that technologies such as the internet and social media too will have equally strong effects (Bimber, 1998). The internet and social media promote social interaction, make political information readily available but there is a clear absence of a link between increase in information and increase in popular political action (Bimber, 1998).

Populism existed even when there was no digital media. Populism as a phenomenon has roots which run deeper as compared to digital phenomena. Besides, digital technology does not cause populism; populism

merely spreads through digital media. Sources of populism are independent of digital media. Populist parties are expert at putting "social media" to use to recruit, organize, and magnify their message. The membership of political parties on digital media platforms often swells up in comparison to their formal membership. Young electorate often connects to real world political activity through virtual media platforms and gradually for this digital generation connecting to politics through digital platforms is becoming a norm rather than an exception.

Narendra Modi's Election Campaign to the 17th Lok Sabha Elections—Spreading the Populist Message Through Twitter

Narendra Modi, the BJP Prime Ministerial candidate for 2019 elections，held 142 public rallies during the period from 28th March to 17th May 2019. All these rallies were organized at maidans (public open spaces) and were tweeted and re-tweeted on social media. The audience of these rallies at the maidans is majorly locals of the area and the message reaches the other parts of the country through TV-news, radio news, you tube videos, and twitter. The case study here examines the tweets from Narendra Modi. The themes highlighted in the election campaigns on twitter are—strong India, hitting at the roots of terrorism, proud of army and its capabilities, inclusive and sustainable development and growth—Sabka Saath and Sabka Vikas, presented himself as the "chowkidar" (security guard) preserving and maintaining India's national interest, strong enough to conduct surgical strikes on land, air, and space, extremely proud of ISROs achievements; this is transparent government; it is under his leadership that India achieved rapid development that India could not achieve under Congress rule; the other in his campaigns is the congress and Pakistan—congress for mere sloganeering, marred by corruption, soft on terror, its opinion on Kashmir resembling that of Pakistan—not strong enough to preserve India's national interest, confused, corruption ridded, dynast, self-serving. Here these tweets are categorized into three subheads.

Table 1

Categorization of PM Narendra Modi's populist tweets during 2019 elections

Pro-people	Anti-elite	Us versus them
Strong and Prosperous India	Throughout 70 years of rule, Congress could not open bank accounts for all Indians	Decisive government versus sloganeering government
Chowkidar	Congress culture of corruption, lack of transparency	Decisive government versus dynast government
Government of Chowkidar had guts to conduct surgical strikes	Questioning the capability of our armed forces	Opportunistic alliances formed by Congress and its allies to serve themselves
Provided connectivity, tourism, and industrial development	Anti-India content and opinion with regards to terrorism	Didi speed-braker to economic development
Protecting the interests of the nation—hard on terrorists	Confused leadership	Congress only deceived people, never understood their aspirations
Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas	Poor considered vote-bank, made no genuine efforts to bring them out of poverty	Bowed down to terrorists and removed stringent laws
Only strong, stable and decisive government provided by BJP understands and fulfills aspirations of people	Congress' manifesto is a list of false promises Corruption on elevator, development on ventilator	Development versus dynasty
People's welfare first		
BJP born from India's indigenous culture, heritage and principles		

Source: Self.

Populism in China: Populism With Chinese Characteristics

The mass line campaign was officially launched at a meeting of the Political Bureau of CPC Central Committee in June 2013 to strengthen Party-people ties. Xi Jinping asked the Communist Party to continue to carry on the Mass Line because it is the "family treasure" and lifeline of the CCP (Xi, 2014). It was a mechanism to encourage the public to pour out their grievances against the authorities and at the same time tighten noose on its officials involved in corruption. While any questions to the legitimacy of CCP are not permitted, CCP provides a mechanism for direct popular participation using digital media—online chat room dialogues between government officials and ordinary citizens. Jessica Chen Weiss in her book *Powerful Patriots* argues that both protestors and government authorities have agency. When Chinese government decides to contain protests and popular nationalistic sentiments, it does that through dissuasion and censorship. Thus, CCP manages rather than manipulates popular protests. Protestors are in driver's seat, motivated by sincere grievances as well as anger that have been stoked by patriotic propaganda and inflammatory media coverage. As activists, dissenters, and protestors plan their anti-foreign demonstrations, it is the government who decides when to go ahead with demonstrations, when to exercise restraint, and when to pause (Weiss, 2014). But the government does not control protestors. Allowing protests act as safety-valve for citizens to vent their anger and grievances. Besides, repression may signal regime's high-handed suppression of patriotic sentiments. Chinese populism exhibits strong sentiments aimed at fulfilling Chinese Dream of rejuvenating Chinese nation and thus building a strong and prosperous nation. Any attempt by any foreign country that seem to deny China of its rightful place in the world or blocking China's way to growth and development is seen as its enemy. Chinese party-state does not allow anti-foreign country sentiments to flare up beyond a point. Similarly, anti-government sentiments are under control; CCP decides the upper limit. However, if there is popular demand for action against corrupt officials and demand for transparent government, such populist demands are responded to without delay to ensure that these sentiments do not turn up against CCP.

Here, speeches of Chinese President Xi Jinping are categorized into four subheads. The speeches analysed are since the time he became the president.

Table 2

Categorization of President Xi Jinping's speeches

Pro-people	Anti-elite	Strengthening CCP	China versus others
Continuation of reform and opening up to seek happiness for Chinese people and a better life	Zero tolerance towards corruption	Inculcating socialist confidence	No one is in a position to dictate to the Chinese people what should or should not be done
The fundamental purpose of the Party is to serve the people	Restrict power in cage of regulators	Stay true to the mission	
Respecting the wishes of the people	Hunting Tigers, swatting flies	Four Comprehensives	
Success of reform is measured by the gain it beings to the people	Hunting down foxes	Four Consciousness	
It must be ensured that the people have a stronger sense of fulfilment and greater happiness, and feel safer and more secure in a more direct and tangible manner		Building Strong Army	

Table 2 to be Continued

In considering and introducing a policy, we must first and foremost ensure the backing, approval and endorsement of the people			
The people-oriented approach must be adhered to and efforts should be made to keep delivering on the people's aspirations for a better life			
Original aspiration and mission for the Chinese communists is to seek happiness for the Chinese people			

Source: Self.

Conclusion

The network society we are living in with virtuality as it essential component—the real political activity is accessed through digital media. Populism which in the broadest sense has been described as a phenomenon that is pro-people, anti-elite, and has the other as an enemy is primarily spread through digital media. Digital media do not cause populism. Populism existed even before digital media came into being. The common themes identified in Indian and Chinese populism are—one, a call for strong and prosperous nation; second, call for transparent government and stringent measures against corrupt officials. However, there is difference in the nature of populism experienced in both the countries. While in India, populism is two-way road with no restrictions what so ever on its expression from its people; moreover, Modi government has always invited suggestions from the common people. In case of China, CCP puts an upper limit on expression by its people. CCP manages populist outpouring rather than manipulating it.

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