Commentary

MODI 'Wave'-Leadership Legitimation and Institutionalization in Indian Politics

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'Wave' is a political phenomenon that leads to a major electoral gain or loss for a political party, an expression of pro- or anti-incumbency public mood. 'MODI-wave' is an electoral manifestation depicting the hegemonic leadership of Narendra Modi that scripts victories in Indian elections based on political charisma, social legitimacy, and cultural nationalism. His critics question the legality of his regime in terms of democratic deficit, incompetent governance, and being unrepresentative of the 'will of the whole people'. However, the saffron party's victories in the national elections of 2014 and 2019 are a reflection of the 'will of the majority' that institutionalized and routinized the Modi wave. 'There is No Alternative to Modi' is deeply entrenched in the minds of voters as they rewarded him with successive leadership renewals and re-legitimations. The validation of Modi's leadership in the national elections of 2024 vindicates that the goalpost of party politics in India has changed from ideological contestations to presidentialization, a battle of charismatic populism.

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Introduction

The political spectrum witnessed an ideological metamorphosis in the party system of India with the advent of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (MODI Wave) in 2014. It shifted from centrist-left to right-wing liberalism, accompanied by the historical actualization of BJP's legitimacy based on Hindu majoritarianism. 'Wave' is a political phenomenon coined by US media that leads to a major electoral gain or loss for a political party—a public expression of a pro or anti-incumbency mandate. A wave in a democratic election represents a skewed voting outcome that results in a decisive victory or vanquishment of the ruling party. 'Waves' in favour of the Indian National Congress (Congress) were quite frequent in the post-colonial era (1947-1984) and coincided with the inauguration of a single-party dominance system. The national hustings between 1985 and 2013 were wave-less elections, as no single party could win a clear majority, leading to a phase of coalitional politics. The interregnum ended in 2014, as a political wave of mammoth proportions resurfaced in national elections —'MODI-wave', which resonated with the personality cult imagination of the

electorate and propelled Modi into political folklore. It depicted his hegemonic leadership that scripts victories in election competitions based on political charisma, social legitimacy, and cultural nationalism. The saffron party's victories in the national elections of 2014 and 2019 reflect the will of the majority, derived from subjective and individual judgement that routinized the Modi wave and accorded procedural legitimacy to his parent party—the BJP.

The left-liberal critics of Modi evaluate his political authority on legitimacy dimensions and term it as a democratic deficit, incompetent governance, and unrepresentative of the 'will of the whole people'. The progressive discourse finds the Modi wave as fleeting and the BJP party system fragile, as it heavily depends on his popularity ratings, and a slight drop in the vote share may result in a defeat in the national election of 2024. It believes that the saffron party is unsustainable and apocalyptic, as there is no successor of Modi in waiting, volatility among newly added Other Backward Class (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Scheduled Tribes (ST) subgroups, instability of voters' multiple identities, and inbuilt perils of party deinstitutionalization and severance[1]. Apart from the academic vulnerabilities, left-leaning public intellectuals and overseas Indian origin scholars, using the western concept of 'Democratic Backsliding', label his regime as a democratic deterioration, deviating towards a communal electoral autocracy and suppressing the civil liberties and constitutional rights of religious minorities. Thus, it becomes pertinent to evaluate the hypothesis of political legitimacy—charismatic routinization of the Modi wave—to find out if it vindicates or negates the contestation of India becoming an authoritarian democracy. The delayering of Modi's leadership praxis and institutionalization of the party system will ascertain its political dominance, the validity of electoral susceptibilities, and its prophetic value in winning the forthcoming national elections.

Political Legitimacy and Institutionalization of Modi 'Wave'

Legitimacy in a power relationship is justified on the parameters of people's beliefs and assessed on the degree of congruence or non-conformity between the system of power/ruler and beliefs, values, and expectations[2][3]. The accountability of the rulers is through elections, and their position depends on their ability to appeal to the majority of the electorate[4]. Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher, defines political legitimacy as the political order's worthiness-recognition as morally right and just, a questionable validity claim, as the stability of the order of domination depends on de facto recognition[5]. The analyses of Modi's leadership legitimacy—normatively structured social relationship—mostly rely on selective observation and subjective judgment that accepts or rejects his political order as justifiable, but it should include empirical input-output empirical variables. Gujarat, under Modi's decadal chief ministerial tenure, witnessed remarkable economic growth and transformation driven by the development model—'Gujarat Model of Development'. He acquired multi-dimensional political legitimacy by changing the governance paradigm by minimizing state intervention, simplifying business rules, providing subsidies to attract corporations, and modernizing infrastructure. The empirics of fast-paced economic growth provided political justification in two ways: *one,* Modi won state elections thrice, which changed his leadership from a Hindutva icon to a charismatic leader—a political phenomenon known as the MODI wave. *Two,* he successfully implemented the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) ideological

agenda, challenging the secular theorization of India with cultural Hindu nationalism, guided by ritualized social relationships, religious festivals, and historical Hindu mythologies. The religious, cultural, political, and economic issues merged in a broader matrix of Gujarati ethos and subnational identity, constituting a seductive ideology for large sections of the urban populace, which proved to be a powerful tool for political organisations to galvanize them around religious lines[6]. Modi created an electoral support base wedded to the 'Hindutva' ideology for political domination, controlled production assets, and sustained hierarchies in social relationships through the state government. He gained political legitimacy: acquired, justified, and exercised in accordance with Indian constitutional laws and the majority electoral consent of the citizens of Gujarat.

He stamped his political authority and managed the empirical consequences of legitimacy by obtaining the obedience of his constituency on a moral, cultural, and ideological foundation for state-citizens partnership. The legitimacy of a politician depends on his capacity to take into account plural expressions of the common good and involves an assessment of his right to represent the citizens, based on a personal ability to understand their problems[7]. The Modi wave became a force majeure in Gujarat by legitimation of proximity that led to a large mobilization of non-partisan voters, initiation into the saffron establishment, and the creation of an ideological ecosystem for majoritarian Hindutva politics. Modi's magic spread its expanse beyond the limits of the state after 2014 and acquired charisma based on cultural-spiritual politics and welfare state capitalism. Sociologist Max Weber defines charisma as 'a certain quality of an individual's personality, by virtue of which the person is set apart from ordinary people and publicly perceived as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or exceptional powers'[8]. In the fast-evolving Indian society facing uncertainties, he became the focal point of new ethnicity criteria that provided close comfort, intimate solidarity, and psychological reassurance. His political curriculum vitae ticked boxes of self-honesty, humble socio-economic background, strong ideological beliefs, proximity with aspirational youth, and a good governance record, making him one of its only kind political leaders in the country. The opinion poll-based rankings of politicians in the last decade reveal Modi being far ahead of his nearest rival, Rahul Gandhi. 'There is No Alternative' to Modi is electorally entrenched in the mind of the voters (the will of the majority), who awarded him with successive leadership renewals and re-legitimation.

Name	2014	2019	2024
Narendra Modi	36	44	41
Rahul Gandhi	14	24	27
Other Leaders/ No Response	50	32	32

Modi's Popularity and Approval Ratings

Source: Data Unit-CSDS, Delhi.

His leadership legitimacy institutionalized the party unit in Gujarat based on systemness and routinization of governing norms/rules that guided cohesive behaviour and self-enforced a distinctive value system. This facilitated party cadres and supporters in acquiring cultural identification and political loyalty. He conscientiously tweaked the party ideology by giving preponderance to Hindu reawakening and pride, creating a Hindutva image perception and populist governance that legitimized and institutionalized the BJP at the national level after he became the PM. Modi led the BJP from the front in educating the plebeian, communicating new government ideas, enlisting support for welfare policies, strengthening social solidarity with BJP ideology, and maximizing beneficiaries exercising their franchise in elections.

Routinization and Charismatic Dominance of Modi's Leadership

The span between 2014 and 2019 was a litmus test for Modi's leadership as he consolidated the political power of the BJP, maintained election-winning ratios, and legitimized his rule by public justification of policy and actions based on shared cultural norms. The critiques of Modi's charisma term it an unstable form of domination that will last as long as he thrives, but in reality, it can go beyond its transitory nature and stabilize by the process of routinization. Routinization of charisma means transmission by way of office that includes its dissociation from a particular individual, making it an objective transferable entity, which can then be enshrined in ritual acts or rationally accepted rules[9]. Charisma plays a key role in the formation of a political party as a vehicle, securing a cohesive 'dominant coalition' and institutionalization that involves 'routinization' of charisma in the party structure[10][11]. The democratization of a leader's authority occurs when his charisma undergoes routinization in a rational-legal framework. Modi exercised power based on rule-boundedness rather than arbitrary and personalistic belief systems. He succeeded in regularizing his leadership by changing group loyalty from a purely charismatic domination to a unity of purpose based on rationally accepted rules and traditional precedence. His legacy and democratic legitimation are a discursive dynamic that requires constant justification and revalidation through competitive elections and public welfarism.

The two constituents of the Modi wave that played a key role in legitimizing his politics of majoritarianism in combination with his charisma are populist rhetoric and transformational governance. Modi's oratory is a blend of vernacularization of politics, first-person narratives, and quasi-official facts of negative acts of earlier ages to justify his accomplishments. He played a prominent role in completing the pending political agenda items of the RSS, such as the judicial reclamation of Ram Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya, the revocation of Article 370 (special status to Jammu and Kashmir), and the amendment of the citizenship act. He launched state-sponsored schemes like the 'Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spirituality Augmentation Drive' and the 'Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana' for redeveloping eminent temples, promoting cultural nationalism, and restoring the golden age of Hinduism. The addition of corridors in renowned temples aimed at cultural-economic rejuvenation, as it nurtured religious tourism and filled the state coffers. He brought an alternative nationalism in place of the existing pseudo-secularism based on the premise that Indian culture is coterminous with Hindu culture. It is believed that Hinduism, being the largest and oldest religious congregation in

the country, should essentially occupy the role of first among the equals, like Christianity in the United States. Though not officially recognized, it should be culturally superior in the same way as Christian holidays, which are widely recognized and celebrated compared with other religions[12][13]. The BJP and its affiliates reinforced Hindutva issues like the religious reconversion of converted Hindus, the ban on cow slaughter, renaming cities with Islamic names, rewriting school textbooks, and deleting chapters on the medieval period. These ceremonials, plus the regular mediatized visuals of Modi visiting temples as a devout Hindu, routinized ritualization, and his religious-cultural legitimacy far surpassed the political authority consented to by the citizens. Party reification depends on the particular historical and symbolic values it successfully claims to represent, the party's organizational strength, access to effective means of communication, and longevity—the ability to survive over a long time[11]. Modi reified the BJP, which refers to the degree a political party is present in the public imagination and to the extent other actors in the political system perceive it as taken-for-granted. His rhetorical political discourse laid the foundation stone for implementing several items and rituals in the grand scheme of the Hindutva project, which in turn routinized the Modi wave in Indian competitive politics.

The driving force of the Modi government has been rapidly turning the wheels of economic and social transformation to achieve the goal of 'New India by 2022' by deepening democratic participation and fostering an inclusive and equalizing partnership with the citizens. Modi succeeded in the charismatic routinization of the BJP party system by taking recourse to the legal-rational path and minimized vote switching between elections by turning a large chunk of the 'swing electorate' into justifiable saffron voters with high levels of party identification through value infusion. He created a democratic patron–client politics of symmetrical relationship with citizens that involved an implicit quid pro quo exchange of state benefits in exchange for electoral support. The staunch commitment to saffron ideology originates from obstinate partisanship and loyalty, as the supporters believed themselves to be the ardent 'beneficiaries of Modi's economic patronization and distributive welfarism'. He recast the monistic vision of popular sovereignty by pluralizing the legitimacy of public policies and institutions and moved the goalpost of Indian politics from democratic stakeholders to welfare scheme beneficiaries.

Conclusion

To conclude, the magic of Modi's leadership and politicking is unique, as his nation-building based on Hindutva nationalism, which subscribes to religious majoritarianism as a legitimator of politics, is transcendental as politically subservient to the 'will of the people'. The consecration of the Ram temple by him symbolized a cultural renaissance and a geometric amplification of the Modi wave legitimization. It furthered the dominance moment of the saffron party and moulded a strong public opinion of his political omnipotence and electoral impregnability[14]. Legitimacy based on 'impartiality-reflexivity-proximity' provides an explanation of Modi's achievement of social generality and consensus-building, overlooking the citizens' partisan claims during his tenure[15]. In his first term (2014-2019), he reconciled the competing claims of citizens through equidistant and impartial welfarism and attained a fair degree of generality of multiplication through micro visions of inclusive benefitting schemes for the marginalized-poor strata of society. However, Modi's second-term governance witnessed a perceptible change that sought generality of

attention to particularity through tailor-made welfare policies for minorities: SC and ST, lower-class Muslims, and targeted programmes for women. It aimed at deepening the principles of social justice and justification with last-mile delivery of public goods to welfare beneficiaries to encompass the 'Will for All'. The democratic legitimacy of Modi's stewardship, achieved through socio-economic investments and competitive politics, has been dynamic, never definitive, as it vacillated in the binary of perfection-imperfection. However, democratic digress theorization of Modi's regime seems to be an overlap of misinformation and propaganda, as there are no research-based data collection mechanisms to record and monitor the structured diminution of civil liberties, systematic circumnavigation of constitutional organizations, and increased scale of religious sectarianism in the country. The Modi wave reobtained political legitimation in the national elections of 2024, but due to anti-incumbency sentiments in some states, it faltered in reclaiming the full 'will of the majority'. The fading of the Modi wave in this round of elections is neither a political novelty nor a permanent feature, as in the last decade it witnessed several electoral crests and troughs in provincial elections. It failed due to anti-incumbency against BJP's state governments-candidates or strong regional parties based on identity politics and parochial governance. However, Modi's magic has the penchant for defying electoral gravity, relegitimizing the BJP after defeats, and regaining its temporary loss of political capital.

Author Contributions

Praveen Rai conceptualized the study, conducted the research, wrote the original draft, and reviewed and edited the manuscript.

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Declarations