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

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Abstract

'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 legality of his regime in terms of democratic deficit, incompetent governance and unrepresentative of 'will of the whole people'. However, the saffron party's victories in national elections 2014 and 2019 is a reflection of 'will of the majority' that institutionalized and routinized Modi wave. 'There is No Alternative' to Modi' is deeply entrenched in minds of voters as they rewarded him with successive leadership renewals and re-legitimations. The validation of Modi's leadership in national elections 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 with 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-public expression of pro or anti-incumbency

mandate. A wave in a democratic election represents a skewed voting outcome results in 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) that coincided with the inauguration of 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 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 national elections 2014 and 2019 reflects the will of the majority, derived from subjective and individual judgement that routinized 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 democratic deficit, incompetent governance and unrepresentative of 'will of the whole people'. The progressive discourse finds Modi wave as fleeting and 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 national election 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) sub groups, instability of voters multiple identities and inbuilt perils of party deinstitutionalization and severance (Maiorano & Sen, 2021). 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 Modi wave to find out if it vindicates-negates the contestation of India becoming an authoritarian democracy. The delayering of Modi's leadership praxis and institutionalization of party system will ascertain its political dominance, validity of electoral susceptibilities and prophetic value in winning the forthcoming national elections.

Political Legitimacy and Institutionalization of Modi 'Wave'

Legitimacy in a power relationship is justified on parameters of people's beliefs and assessed on the degree of congruence or non-conformity of it between the system of power/ruler and beliefs, values and expectations (Amossy, 2022; Beetham, 2013). The accountability of the ruler's is through elections and their position depends on their ability to appeal to majority of the electorate (Sartori, 1987; Dahl, 1956). Jürgen Habermas, German philosopher, defines political legitimacy as political order's worthiness-recognition as morally right and just, a questionable validity claim, as the stability of order of domination depends on de facto recognition (Habermas, 1976). The analyses of Modi's leadership legitimacy-normatively structured social relationship mostly rely on selective observation and subjective judgment that accepts/rejects his political order as justifiable, but it should include empirical input-output empirical variables. Gujarat under Modi's decadal chief ministerial tenure witnessed a remarkable economic growth and transformation driven by

development model-‘Gujarat Model of Development’. He acquired multi-dimensional political legitimacy by changing the governance paradigm by minimizing state intervention, simplifying business rules, subsidies to attract corporate and infrastructure modernization. The empirics of fast-paced economic growth provided political justification in two ways: *one*, Modi won state elections thrice that changed his leadership from a Hindutva icon to a charismatic leader-political phenomenon- *MODI wave*. *Two*, he successfully implemented the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s (RSS) ideological agenda, challenging 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 broader matrix of Gujarati ethos and subnational identity, constituting a seductive ideology for large sections of urban populace, which proved a powerful tool for political organisations to galvanise them around religious lines (Prakash, 2003). Modi created an electoral support base-wedded to ‘Hindutva’ ideology for political domination, controlled production assets and sustained hierarchies in social relationship through the state government. He gained political legitimacy: acquired, justified and exercised in accordance with Indian constitutional laws and majority electoral consent of citizens of the Gujarat.

He stamped his political authority and managed the empirical consequences of legitimacy by obtaining the obedience of his constituency on 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 personal ability to understand their problems (Rosanvallon, 2008). Modi wave became a force majeure in Gujarat by legitimation of proximity that led to large mobilization of non-partisan voters, initiation into saffron establishment and creating 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’ (Weber, 1947). 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 good governance record makes him one of its only kind political leaders in the country. The opinion poll based rankings of politicians in the last decade reveals 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 (will of the majority), who awarded him with successive leadership renewals and re-legitimation.

Modi’s Popularity and Approval Ratings			
Name	2014	2019	2024
Narendra Modi	36	44	41
Rahul Gandhi	14	24	27
Others Leaders/ No Response	50	32	32

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 the 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-institutionalized BJP at the national level post after he became the PM. Modi led the BJP from front in educating the plebian, 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 consolidated the political power of 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 (Weber, 1978). 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 party structure (Panebianco, 1988; Randall & Svåsand, 2002). The democratization of 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 unity of purpose based on rationally accepted rules and traditional precedence. His legacy and democratic legitimation is a discursive dynamic that requires constant justification and revalidation through competitive elections and public welfarism.

The two constituent of 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 RSS like judicial reclamation of Ram Janambhoomi in Ayodhya, revocation of Article 370 (special status to Jammu and Kashmir) and amendment of the citizenship act. He launched state sponsored schemes like 'Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spirituality Augmentation Drive' and '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 existing pseudo secularism based on the premise that Indian culture is coterminous with Hindu culture. It 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 as compared with other religions (Vaishnav, 2019 & Chandra, 2018). The BJP and its affiliates reinforced Hindutva issues like religious reconversion of converted Hindus, ban on cow slaughter, renaming cities with Islamic names, rewriting schools textbooks and deleting chapters on 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 by the citizens. Party reification depends on particular historical and symbolic values it successfully claims to represent, party's organizational strength, access to effective means of communication and longevity-ability to survive over long time (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). Modi reified BJP that refers to the degree a political party is present in the public imagination and to the extent other actors in 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 Hindutva project, which in turn routinized Modi wave in Indian competitive politics.

The driving force of Modi government has been rapid turning the wheels of economic and social transformation to achieve the goal of 'New India by 2022' by deepening democratic participation and inclusive and equalizing partnership with the citizens. Modi succeeded in charismatic routinizing of BJP party system by taking recourse to legal-rational path and minimized vote switching between elections by turning a large chunk of '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 of electoral support. The staunch commitment to saffron ideology originates from obstinate partisanship and loyalty, as the supporters believed themselves as the ardent 'beneficiaries of Modi's economic patronization and distributive welfarism'. He recast the monistic vision of popular sovereignty by pluralization of 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 that subscribes to religious majoritarianism as legitimator of politics, transcendental as politically subservient to the 'will of the people'. The consecration of Ram temple by him symbolized cultural renaissance and geometric amplification of 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 (Rai, 2019). 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 (Rosanvallon, 2011). In 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 social-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 is no research based data collection mechanisms to record and monitor structured diminution of civil liberties, systematic circumnavigation of constitutional organizations and increased scale of religious sectarianism in the country. Modi wave reobtained political legitimation in national elections 2024, but due to anti-incumbency sentiments in some states, it faltered in reclaiming the full 'will of the majority'. The fading of 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 magic has the penchant for defying electoral gravity, re-legitimizing BJP after defeats and regaining its temporary loss of political capital.

Statements and Declarations

The author reports that there is no competing interests to declare.

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