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Rise of Populism in Northeast India: A Case of Assam

Rakesh Mochahary and **Loung Nathan K. K.**

Department of International Studies, Political Science and History, Christ University, India

Correspondence: Rakesh Mochahary (rakesh.mochahary@res.christuniversity.in)

Abstract

A blend of historical and contemporary forces has shaped populism in India. The Congress government's shortcomings (2004–2014), marked by dynastic politics and corruption, paved the way for the rise of populism, particularly under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which capitalized on anti-elite sentiment. Narendra Modi's leadership, characterized by Hindu nationalism and a development agenda, has significantly altered India's political landscape. This study focuses on the rise of populism in Northeast India, specifically in Assam, where populist movements and leaders have increasingly influenced the socio-political environment. It explores the socio-economic conditions and identity politics that have driven the growth of populist ideologies, often leading to the marginalization of ethnic minorities. By analyzing key political events, movements, and policies, the research seeks to uncover the root causes of populism in Assam and its impact on democracy, social cohesion, and regional stability. Employing a qualitative methodology that includes political speeches, media analysis, and empirical evidence, the study examines how political leaders in Assam have mobilized regional and ethnic sentiments for electoral gains, further exacerbating ethnic marginalization. The article aims to understand the catalysts and consequences of populist governance in Assam, offering insights into the broader trend of populism in Northeast India and its future trajectory.

Keywords

Assam; economic constraints; ethnic politics; marginalization; populism; Northeast India

1. Introduction

Populism is gaining traction across various disciplines within the social sciences and humanities (Möller, 2024), and it has been a political buzzword of the 21st century (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In the 1960s, "populism" primarily referred to movements focused on decolonization and debates concerning the future of peasantism (Müller, 2017). However, with the success of Brexit in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump's

2016 presidential campaign in the United States, the term has entered mainstream political discourse and daily conversation. Political figures like Donald Trump, Norbert Hofer in Austria, and Marine Le Pen in France, among others, have been labelled populists. Despite being one of the few billionaires in the US, Trump crafted an image as a "man of the people" (Cox, 2018). Similarly, leaders like Bolsonaro in Brazil or Narendra Modi in India, have ascended to power by adopting a populist discourse that opposes "self-interested elites," who control the levers of socio-political power and appeal to nationalist sentiments (P. Singh, 2021). De Cleen (2017) refers to the elites as certain powerful groups within the nation, such as national politicians, intellectuals, and artists. The people against the various elites have been at the core of the populist movements. Modern populism encapsulates two primary tenets: a focus on "the people" and a rejection of elitism (Akkerman et al., 2014). These two concepts are manifested in a broad critique of representative democracy and a demand for a more central role for the populace in decision-making processes (Pilet & Gherghina, 2024). In recent years, charismatic leaders, so-called "strong men," and populists have won elections (Kaul & Vajpeyi, 2020), e.g., Narendra Modi in India.

India's political landscape has been profoundly shaped by charismatic leaders, who are elected by the populace either directly or indirectly to establish a governing authority. Charisma is an elusive concept (Jaffrelot, 2015), defined as "the quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Ake, 1966, p. 4). Charisma can function as a tool within populist movements (Jaffrelot, 2015), providing political leaders the capacity to establish a direct connection with the people, thereby enhancing their appeal and widespread support. In the Indian context, the roots of charismatic leadership are closely linked to the Hindu nationalist ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), commonly known as Hindutva. Narendra Modi effectively mobilized this ideology to create a cohesive and exclusive political community of Hindu adherents and supporters (Subedi & Scott, 2021). Jaffrelot (2015) notes that Modi's campaign under the BJP focused on tried and tested tactics and themes, including anti-corruption, caste politics, and some Hindu nationalist overtones where and when required. Leaders like Modi have a strong influence on the political landscape, and make a palpable impact on their audience, attesting to the importance of charisma in Indian politics. Despite the region's tribal and ethnic diversity, populist charismatic influence has also made its mark in Northeast India. Modi's influence has touched the indigenous people of the northeast, especially emerging leaders like Sarbananda Sonowal and Himanta Biswa Sharma in Assam.

This article prioritizes populism in Northeast India, focusing on the case of Assam. The existing literature on nationalism and populist politics in India, as examined by scholars such as Rajagopal (2016), Chacko (2018), McDonnell and Cabrera (2018), and Saleem (2021), provides critical insights into the broader national landscape. In the context of Northeast India, recent works by Jha and Chakrabarty (2023), Padmapati and Borthakur (2024), Borah (2024), and G. A. Sharma (2024) have explored the dynamics of identity politics and the rise of populism in the region. The focus here will be how the BJP has maintained its dominance in Assam since the rise of charismatic leaders like Modi in India, using different strategies on various fronts.

Political strategies have been greatly influenced by digital media in Indian politics, particularly in the 2016 and 2019 elections (Mehta, 2019). Social media has become a key means of political communication, being eagerly utilized by parties and politicians (Gilardi et al., 2022). Indian political parties employ various media and campaigning strategies to reach a diverse audience and gain support (Banerjee, 2017; Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). This article attempts to examine the rise of the BJP under local leaders who sought to

consolidate indigenous communities under a singular religious identity. We ask: What strategies and tactics are used by these populist leaders among the marginalized communities? To address this question, the article adopts a qualitative methodology centered on political oratory, journalistic accounts, media portrayals, and empirical evidence. This investigation scrutinizes the nuanced methods driving the rise of populism in the region. The dialogue among the electorate regarding competing messages and narratives articulated in leaders' rally speeches is a crucial factor for understanding campaigns (Kumar, 2022). By thoroughly examining these sources, our study aims to unravel the complexities of populism in Assam and its impact on the region's political and socio-economic dynamics.

2. Conceptual Framework

Populism, as defined by Mudde (2004, p. 544), is a "thin ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and holds that politics should represent the general will of the people." De Cleen (2017) notes that populists discursively construct and claim to represent "the people," allowing their parties and movements to turn to populism as a strategy to acquire power even when they were originally not populist—and even if they do not necessarily remain populist once they are in power. De Cleen et al. (2018) have put forward nine rules of engagement in critical research on populism, drawing a formal understanding of the concepts of populism from Mudde (2004), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), and Stanley (2008), and certainly sharing some affinities with the "thin ideological" approach to populism now rather dominant in mainstream political science and political communications research. Populist politics embody an articulatory pattern—a formal reason or logic—whose elements (grievances, demand, identities, etc.) can have as their source any number of ideologies (De Cleen et al., 2018).

Populist politics claim to speak for "the ordinary people," "the little man," "the common man," and "the man in the street" as an up-grouping for not representing "the people" and endangering its interests (De Cleen, 2017). Populism is often analyzed through vertical and horizontal dimensions: Vertically, it pits "the people" against the supposedly corrupt elite; horizontally, it distinguishes between "insiders" and "outsiders," emphasizing the division between those who share a common way of life and those perceived as threats to it (Falki, 2022). However, Jansen (2011) warns against overgeneralizing the term, as it can encompass any entity that claims legitimacy by appealing to the common populace, often excluding elite strata (Tarragoni, 2024). Populist leaders typically seek to rally support from the common people to gain political power, often emphasizing democracy solely as the authority vested in the people (Mény & Surel, 2002). Cox (2018) argues that populism arises as a strategy to acquire and maintain power—a strategy in which communication plays a vital role, with social networks and media being largely utilized to disseminate both true information and false propaganda (Araújo & Guazina, 2024; Ferreira, 2022; Recuero & Soares, 2022). Falki (2022) highlights populism as the contemporary political rhetoric, framing the opposition between "us" and "them." While populism is crucial for understanding political dynamics, De Cleen (2017) warns against overloading the concept with excessive meanings, urging precision in its application.

Ernesto Laclau defined populism as "a way of constructing the political on the basis of interpellating the underdog to mobilize against the existing status quo" (Hansen, 2018, p. 2). In this study, populism is conceptualized as a political ideology strategically constructed and articulated by a charismatic leader with the primary aim of mobilizing and garnering support from marginalized communities. This framework

emphasizes the leader's role in tapping into the grievances, aspirations, and sentiments of those who feel excluded, or indigenous communities, by existing political structures.

3. Ideological Constructs and Political Strategies

Corruption has been a key topic for populist rhetoric in India, mobilizing ordinary people who are weary of the Congress government's failure to sustain growth and development because of dynasticism and corruption (Sinha, 2021). Termed "the elite" and deemed "corrupt," the Congress Party is often described as pandering to minorities for votes and standing in the way of "development" due to their ineptitude, corruption, and self-interest (Yadav & Kirk, 2023; see also Chacko, 2018). The BJP emerged against them as the anti-corruption alternative for India (Chacko, 2018).

In India, populism is seldom associated with notions of popular sovereignty or moralistic views of the innocence of the masses and the corruption of the elite. It does not typically entail majoritarian politics based on race, religion, or ethnicity (Varshney et al., 2021). Earlier instances of "strong leader politics," like Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure (1947–1962) and Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency (1975–1977), set the stage for India's current authoritarian populism (Sinha, 2021). Indira Gandhi's "Banish Poverty" (*Garibi Hatao*) campaign aimed to rally support from the common people (Varshney et al., 2021). However, the Congress-led governments from 2004 to 2014 oversaw a period of slower-paced development, leading to disillusionment among the masses. Against this backdrop, Narendra Modi emerged as a prominent figure in the BJP, using his charismatic leadership effectively. Since 2014, the BJP under Modi has risen as a prominent populist force (Jakobsen et al., 2019). Kaul and Vajpeyi (2020) note India's unique trajectory in electing the nationalist BJP despite being the world's largest democracy, installing Modi as Prime Minister. Modi's populist rhetoric—illustrated by slogans like *acche din aane wale hain* (good days are coming) or *vikas purush* (man of development)—embodies a moral authority that seems to align with the majority's interests while discrediting the opposition as morally and financially corrupt.

Modi's role in steering the BJP's right-wing politics at the national level exemplifies his extraordinary charismatic leadership, which has been validated by his successive election victories in 2014 and 2019, and the formation of the government in 2024 (Subedi & Scott, 2021). The BJP's nationalist agenda seeks to redefine India through its Hindu cultural heritage, an ideology known as Hindutva (Flåten, 2017). Central to this agenda is the party's effort to frame its nationalist policies around Hindutva, exploiting both real and perceived conflicts between Hindus, whom it claims to represent, and Muslims, whom it portrays as the primary adversaries of both Hindus and the Indian state (G. Singh, 2019). This approach has sometimes led to social tension and violence, creating new political dynamics for the BJP to navigate (McGuire, 2002). Hindutva and Hindu populism have been integral to Modi's political success from the beginning (Saleem, 2021). Since its inception, Hindutva—or "Hindu-ness"—has been a core element of the BJP's platform, essential to its ideological mission to transform India into a Hindu Rashtra, modeled after the mythic kingdom of the god-king Rama, which the BJP venerates (Copland, 2002). The BJP's objective extends beyond mere governance to affirm that its vision of Hinduism is natural and indisputable (McGuire, 2002). For instance, Modi's rhetoric often invokes cultural and religious symbols deeply rooted in Hindu tradition, resonating with large electorate sections. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the Ram temple's construction in Ayodhya are critical examples of how the BJP's policies align with this vision of a Hindu Rashtra, reinforcing the narrative of reclaiming India's Hindu past.

Modi's authoritarian populism is committed to the construction of a trope of economic growth and development that seeks to address frustrated subaltern aspirations in the context of rising unemployment while also opposing elitism and promulgating individualism (Dutta & Nielsen, 2021). Jha and Chakrabarty (2023) assert that India provides one of the most recent but vigorous examples of populism enacted through electoral democracy. This populism operates within a Hindu nationalist milieu, which seeks to construct a unified Hindu identity. Through policies, political rhetoric, and cultural symbolism, the BJP promotes a Hinduised notion of indigeneity, framing Hindus as the rightful inheritors of the nation.

Historically, the states of northern India have been relatively important for the BJP; however, recently, it has inroads into the south with Karnataka and Goa, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, as well as Bengal and the Northeastern states (Kumar, 2022). Modi's fusion of nationalism with the campaign slogan "Together with all, development for all, trust of all" (*sabka saath*, *sabka vikas*, *sabka vishwas*), which gained public traction in 2019, formed a prevalent narrative (Kumar, 2022). Under Modi's leadership, India saw a shift towards a Hindu authoritarian state, prioritizing Hindus as primary citizens and marginalizing Muslims with fewer rights (Sinha, 2021). The BJP-led central government's Ministry of Environment banned the slaughter and sale of beef in 2017, citing the protection of cows under the Gao Rakhshaw ideology, emblematic of contemporary Indian far-right populism that marginalizes minority communities (Masood & Nisar, 2020). Due to its ideologies, Modi and the BJP give expression to xenophobia and Islamophobia resulting both from Modi's own commitments and certain facets of the national and global political environment (Basu, 2020). Leveraging on the public discontent, the BJP government conducted mass gatherings and rallies against elite corruption, fostering antagonism between the "Hindu people" and a "corrupt elite" perceived as catering to minorities. Similar ideologies and political strategies have been enforced in various states, such as Assam. D. P. Sharma et al. (2019) assert that one of the key strategies to gain support in Assam is referring to Assam and "Bharat" in Vedic Puranic and epic texts, and creating a strong sense of belonging to Hindu identity.

4. Regional Mobilization and BJP's Strategic Victory in Assam

The political mobilization of parties in India is significantly shaped by the country's regional diversity, with ethnic and linguistic identities such as Kannada, Tamil, Marathi, and Punjabi serving as critical factors in this (Bijukumar, 2023). This mobilization is particularly evident in the Northeast, where various ethnic groups assert their regional interests. Bordering Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, and China, the Northeastern states are hubs of ethnic diversity and mobilization (Ziipao, 2020). With just 2% of its borders shared with other Indian states, the region comprises eight states connected by the Siliguri Corridor, famously dubbed the "Chicken's Neck" (Middleton, 2023). The "chicken's neck" refers to the narrow 21 km corridor connecting Northeast India to mainland India, established by the Radcliffe Line, the boundary drawn by the British colonial administration before their departure in 1947 (Kalita, 2011). Each state harbors distinct ethnic groups like Bodos, Nagas, and Mizos, influencing electoral politics with their unique cultures (Hausing, 2022). Regional politics in the Northeast is shaped by social, ethnic, and geographical factors, alongside conflicts over land use and language issues (Riamei, 2022). Traditionally dominated by the Congress Party, the region has seen a surge in support for the BJP, which has strategically used Hindutva ideology alongside issues of "development" and "security" in its agenda. BJP's strategy involves reaching diverse communities through cultural icons and alternative narratives, solidifying its regional presence.

Assam, a strategically located state in the Northeast, has emerged as a key hub for the BJP and its populist leader. Its strategic geography, connecting all other Northeastern states, plays a crucial role in politics and culture. The rise of populist leaders in Assam can be attributed to various factors, including historical grievances, economic challenges, and the manipulation of ethnic sentiments. These leaders often position themselves as champions of the indigenous Assamese population, pledging to address issues such as illegal immigration, unemployment, and underdevelopment. By tapping into the fears and insecurities of the local population, these leaders have been able to mobilize widespread support and secure electoral victories. This populist surge can be traced back to the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which emphasized the importance of "self-identity" and the deportation of "illegal migrants."

The present government acquired a landslide victory in Assam in 2014, 2019, and 2024, including certain developmental initiatives combined with hyper populism, the success of its long-term strategy bringing the tea plantation workers and tribal communities into the Hindutva fold (Sufian, 2022). In the general elections of 2014, the BJP emerged victorious and appointed Sarbananda Sonowal and Kiran Rijiju as ministers in the central cabinet, which changed the political landscape in the Northeastern region. Prominent leaders in Assam were Himanta Biswa Sarma, Chandra Mohan Patowary, Manoj Baruah, Tapan Gogoi, etc. Himanta Biswa Sarma became the Chief Minister of Assam on May 10, 2021, under the BJP. These local leaders have garnered widespread support based on the belief that they bring transformative change to the region while preserving its cultural heritage, traditions, and identity.

4.1. BJP's Economic and Developmental Agenda

The BJP campaigned on economic growth, development, and good governance (Boruah et al., 2023). The BJP 2014 election manifesto prioritized infrastructure development in the region, focusing on addressing Assam's recurring flood issues through integrated river water management (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2014). It emphasized combating illegal migration into Assam, strengthening border security through fencing, ensuring the safety of students from the region studying in other parts of the country, and taking a firm stance against insurgent groups (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2014; M. A. Singh, 2016). In general, Northeast region perspective, India has been focused on Look East Policy to upgrade its infrastructural development to connect neighboring international countries. Despite improved communication within the Northeast states, challenges in achieving effective connectivity and infrastructure persist due to geographical constraints. This allowed the BJP to leverage its regional influence. Notably, the connectivity between Meghalaya and Assam was enhanced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inauguration of the first train on November 29, 2014 (E. Bureau, 2014).

It is unsurprising to see local or tribal leaders in Assam supporting the BJP as they fielded local candidates from the marginalized sections to gain strong support at the grassroots level (Sonowal belonged to the Kachari tribe). The BJP capitalized on impending illegal migration issues, the question of tribal lands, and conflict to draw the attention of the electorate, and joined hands with the Bodoland People's Front party of the Bodo tribe as well as Assam Gana Parishad (Tripathi et al., 2018). Prior to the 2014 Lok Sabha election, Narendra Modi highlighted the issue of "illegal immigrants," asserting that, if elected, they would deport these individuals back to Bangladesh (Boruah et al., 2023). In Assam, populist leaders frequently make grand promises of economic development and prosperity, tapping into the aspirations of the local population for a better future (J. Singh, 2023; Sinha, 2024). Nevertheless, the region's economic constraints and challenges

often impede the realization of these promises. Consequently, populist leaders may resort to divisive tactics or scapegoating to deflect attention from their inability to deliver on economic commitments.

4.2. Ethnic Politics and "Otherness"

One of the critical features of populism in Assam is its reliance on ethnic politics. Right-wing populist politics has been able to construct people's religion as an "elite" or "otherness." Falki (2022) asserted that "religious sentiments primarily associated with divine purposes aid populist leaders in mobilizing communities of similar faith, irrespective of their individual, ethnic, regional, or racial identities in support of populist narratives." The claim by right-wing populist leaders of their allegiance to nationalist ideals serves to delineate their envisioned community within a broader framework encompassing civilizational and cultural dimensions. The utilization of religious sentiments within right-wing populist politics indirectly undermines the political and socio-economic demands of minority religious groups residing within the nation's borders. Right-wing populism intertwines ethnonationalism with specific religious identities, concurrently propagating exclusionary narratives (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021).

The BJP embraced a strategy of co-option, resulting in the acquisition of allegiance from various communities (Riamei, 2022). The challenge of illegal migration by Bangladeshi Muslims has been promptly employed as a tool for vigorous campaigning to capture the hearts of the people in Assam aggressively. The BJP strategically leveraged the ethnic and communal tensions and schisms existing between the Bodo community and the Muslim minority within Bodo regions to achieve electoral supremacy. Its commitment to tribal interests through an electoral coalition with the Bodoland People's Front and by extending assistance to other tribal groups, such as the Rabhas and the Tiwas, was demonstrated by the BJP. Sarbananda Sonowal, the tribal leader, assumed a populist role in galvanizing the Kachari tribal community residing in the tribal plains of Assam.

Reports attributing the rise in vegetable prices in Assam to Muslim vendors have circulated widely. These vendors, often referred to as "Miya" (a term for Bengali-speaking Muslims believed to have migrated from Bangladesh), have been criticized for allegedly being "highly communal" (Kumar, 2023). Despite efforts towards inclusivity, such as the decision to convert government-operated Madrasa schools into general educational institutions, discontent has arisen within the Muslim minority community, perceiving it as a violation of their religious and cultural rights (Balaji, 2022; S. Kashyap, 2023). Christians, a minority religious group, face threats from Hindu groups who are demanding the removal of religious symbols from Christian schools and offering severe consequences to those who do not oblige (W. T. Staff, 2024b). Additionally, the Assam government plans to introduce a bill promoting prayers for the sick, labelled as "magical healing," targeting tribal communities (Kaur, 2024). On February 10, 2024, the Assam Cabinet approved the Assam Healing (Prevention of Evil) Practices Bill to address such concerns (H. T. Bureau, 2024a). Populist leaders exploit ethnic divisions to strengthen their power base, presenting themselves as protectors of the indigenous Assamese against perceived threats from migrants. However, this emphasis on ethnicity can marginalize minority communities in Assam, particularly Muslims and Christian tribals, intensifying regional tensions and divisions.

4.3. Illegal Migrants—A Threat?

The rise of populism in Assam in recent years can be attributed to several interconnected factors. Illegal migration and the infiltration of immigrants have fueled populist sentiment, with leaders advocating for the deportation of migrants to preserve Assamese culture. Jha and Chakrabarty (2023) note that the case of Bangladeshi migrants in India shows how figures of migrants can be invoked for economic, cultural, and political grievances. They further argue that these politics of grievances and insecurity provide fodder for the rise of right-wing populism. Historical figures such as Gopinath Bordoloi and Bimala Prasad Chaliha championed the cause of Assam's excluded and partially excluded areas, as well as the rights of tea planters under the Assam Plantations Labour Act. Furthermore, leaders like Prafulla Mahanta and Bhrigu Kumar Phukan gained popularity by addressing the pressing issue of rising illegal migration in the region. Former Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi acknowledged the seriousness of the issue, emphasizing the government's commitment to detecting and deporting illegal migrants (G. S. Kashyap, 2015). Himanta Biswa Sarma, present Chief Ministry of Assam, tweeted: "It is our moral obligation to ensure that our land remains with us and we do not sell it to illegal immigrants" (Sarma, 2023). Populist leaders, in their role as public representatives, have been instrumental in addressing these concerns.

However, in recent times, attempts have been made to extend citizenship to Hindu Bengalis who migrated to India post-1971. These actions have been seen as a profound threat to the indigenous people of Assam, raising concerns over the potential disruption of the region's demographic balance and marginalization of indigenous communities. Lurinjyoti Gogoi, president of the Assam Jatiya Parishad party and former leader of All Assam Students' Union (AASU), stated that such a decision disregards the strong sentiments of the indigenous Assamese people against illegal migration and only benefits political parties of vote bank from the illegal Bangladeshi (Karmakar, 2024). Jha and Chakrabarty (2023) argue that the binaries of "migrant" and "native," "settler" and "indigenous," "foreigner" and "citizen," as well as "outsider" and "insider," are strategically constructed and actively maintained within political discourse. These constantly reinforced dichotomies acquire new meanings closely intertwined with politico-electoral motivations. Assam has experienced migration-related conflicts for the past four decades, often resulting in large-scale violence against indigenous communities. Political actors have played a central role in exacerbating these conflicts by exploiting concerns over cultural preservation, illegal migration, and tribal land rights, which remain at the heart of Assam's political discourse and are frequently used to mobilize support (Gogoi, 2023). The dichotomy of "indigenous and legitimate settlers" and "illegal migrants or outsiders" has been used to fuel sentiments of danger and threat among "legitimate settlers," who are persuaded to fear land occupation and cultural assimilation. For political leaders, the word "illegal migrants" acts as a tool to awaken the indigenous people to move against the migrants.

4.4. Social Media Strategy and Campaign Tactics

Populism, a concept centered on charismatic leaders having direct, unmediated access to the masses, has found a new playground in social media. Social media platforms, which immediately connect parties to the people, have become the preferred means of communication for populist leaders today (Varshney et al., 2021). Social media has empowered these leaders to disseminate their messages, rally support, and, most importantly, shape public opinion (Mazzoleni, 2014). In the present day, political activities that involve political communication are largely conducted via the media, including social media (Kumar, 2022).

The portrayal of famous leaders online can significantly impact their popularity among the masses and their supporters. Modi, a popular leader, has been praised by international media on several occasions: An article on China's *Global Times* praises India's strides under Prime Minister Modi, who they call "indeed, a major power"; Russian President Putin also praised Prime Minister Modi, saying that "India is making progress under Modi's leadership" (Now, 2024). Such favorable and sympathetic portrayals frame these leaders as the people's champions against entrenched elites, or as defenders of regional interests.

Modi and his supporters have strategically utilized social media to gain people's support. Saikia and Bhattacharyya (2022, p. 341) assert: "One of the crucial features of the election campaign [led] by the BJP, the party that won political office in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, was its reliance on digital data and professionally informed campaign strategies." In an interview, Modi (2024) said: "Today, the Northeast is neither far from Delhi nor far from the heart" (*aaj northeast na Delhi se door hai aur na dil se door hai*). Social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X (former Twitter) are used during campaigns to garner backing during the elections, along with more conventional media—one such example is *Mann ki Baat* (which translates to "words from the heart" or "heartfelt words"), a radio show where Modi often addresses the nation and shares his thoughts on various issues. In 2019, the BJP campaign anthem, advocating for nation-building under the leadership of the Modi government, featured the slogan: "Let's once again form a Modi government, Let's move forward together and advance the nation" (*chalo phir ek baar hum, Modi sarkaar banate hai, chalo milke saath, aage desh ko badhate hai*; Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019).

Similar tactics were used in Assam, exemplified by the BJP campaign under Himanta Biswa Sharma, "Once again Modi's government" (*Akou Ebar Modi Sarkar*). The Chief Minister's X account, *Himanta Biswa Sharma (Modi ka parivar)*—translating to "family of Modi" or "Modi's family"—illustrates the close relationship and shared political strategies between Himanta Biswa Sarma and Narendra Modi. In his most recent campaign, Modi inaugurated several road upgrade projects valued at over Rs. 3,400 crores. These projects include enhancing 43 roads and 38 bridges as part of the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) Corridor Connectivity. Additionally, the Maa Kamakhya Divya Pariyojana (Maa Kamakhya access corridor) was approved under the Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North Eastern Region (Modi, 2024). The lure of development for political gain has been a common strategy in the region. Such economic development projects were inaugurated during the election campaign to gain media attention. Political figures like Modi and Rahul Gandhi have employed victimhood narratives to resonate with audiences. Modi, presenting himself as a low-caste tea seller, claims his opponents dislike him for his humble background, while Gandhi portrays himself as a victim of Modi's vengefulness towards his family. However, exploiting religion and minority status for populist gains is problematic. In Assam, Bangladeshi migrants have become symbols of economic, cultural, and political grievances, fueling right-wing populism and insecurity among settled Bengali-speaking Muslims. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) exacerbates exclusionary politics, neglecting Muslims and reinforcing Hindu–Muslim segregation. This undermines the idea of religious diversity and promotes the notion of a Hindu-exclusive India.

5. Challenges of Inclusive and Exclusive Politics

Historically, religion has never served as a basis for citizenship in India before 2016. For obvious reasons, utilizing religion as a criterion for citizenship not only constitutes discrimination but also exacerbates communal tensions, fundamentally undermining the principles of secularism and democracy (Connah, 2021).

The CAA, recently employed by the BJP, aims to grant citizenship to persecuted minorities from neighboring countries, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, provided they entered India before December 31, 2014 (Connah, 2021; A. Sharma, 2024). However, the CAA's enactment in December 2019 triggered widespread protests across India, as it exclusively benefits Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsees, and Jains while explicitly excluding Muslims (Saxena, 2023; A. Sharma, 2024). Yogendra Yadav, a political scientist and activist, said that this move (relating to CAA) of voter polarisation by the BJP before elections is "unsurprising" (J. A. Staff, 2024).

The Northeastern states of Assam and Tripura, which share borders with Bangladesh—263 km and 856 km, respectively—are significantly impacted by migration. Although the migrant population includes some Muslims, the majority are believed to be Bengali-speaking Hindus (Baruah, 2024a). In Assam, the BJP has been accused of regarding Bengali Hindus, tea tribes, and Scheduled Castes as a dependable electoral base while perceiving Muslims as potential electoral threats (Sufian, 2022). The CAA has faced criticism for its exclusion of Muslims, India's second-largest religious group: The United Nations, for instance, has denounced the bill as "fundamentally discriminatory" ("New citizenship law," 2019; see also Saxena, 2023), and the US State Department has voiced its concerns by underscoring the necessity of religious freedom and equal treatment for all communities (W. T. Staff, 2024a).

The National Register of Citizens (NRC), initially compiled in 1951, aims to list Indian citizens in Assam based on electoral rolls up to March 24, 1971 (Ranjan, 2021). Residents must provide documents or proof of lineage to be included. However, many residents are discontented with exclusions, prompting the BJP to label the NRC a sham, alleging wrongful exclusion of Hindus and inclusion of Muslims (Kajla & Jahan, 2023). Populist politics in Assam intersects with issues of legality and nativist sentiments, evident in initiatives like the NRC, which excluded 1,906.657 individuals, and the CAA, both focusing on residency (Jha & Chakrabarty, 2023). Despite claims of inclusion, the NRC may exclude genuine citizens, including Hindus, due to inadequate documentation, such as land deeds or birth certificates (Connah, 2021). Assam's protests have led to perceptions of Muslims as marginalized, with slogans like "Ali" for Bengali Muslims, "Kuli" for Adivasis, "Bongali" for Bengali Hindus, and *Naak Chyapta Nepali* ("flat nose Nepali") for Nepali individuals (Jha & Chakrabarty, 2023).

The implementation of the CAA and the NRC has emerged as a divisive factor in Assamese politics, with BJP's ethnocratic policies prioritizing the interests of "non-registered Hindu migrants" while legalizing the anti-Muslim 2019 CAA to safeguard its geopolitical and electoral interests (Sufian, 2022). Populist politics, characterized by exclusionary tendencies, prompt critical scrutiny alongside widespread support. This trajectory ostracizes individuals deemed outside the purview of "the people," subjecting them to blanket denials of citizenship. Religion, ethnicity, and economic factors are strategically leveraged against "non-natives" (Jha & Chakrabarty, 2023). The politics of exclusion (Siam, 2023) and the utilization of authoritarian populist tactics by the current Indian regime undermine fundamental rights and privileges for certain groups. The protest erupted soon after the first CAA beneficiary—Dulon Das, a Bangladesh-born—was granted citizenship in Assam (H. T. Bureau, 2024b).

The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion have never been restricted to a single political party in India. Assam, situated at the core and bordered by states such as Meghalaya, Mizoram, and the predominantly Christian Nagaland, presents significant political challenges for the right-wing party. While primarily serving as a hub for community services, the Church also exerts considerable influence on the political landscape.

The pastoral commitment of priests and the leadership of church figures often drive them to actively engage in the diverse struggles their congregants face, including those within the political arena (Lon, 2024). Tikhir (2024) argues that Christianity has become one of several instruments used to articulate pan-tribal identity and contestation in Nagaland. In Meghalaya, Congress candidate Saleng Sangma, while addressing the audience, cited a biblical verse, drawing a parallel to other political parties: "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?" (Hills, 2024). Similarly, political leader Timothy D. Shira remarked that the BJP's treatment of Christians has consistently been questionable, referencing an incident where tourists attending church gatherings in Assam were forcibly accused of attempting conversions (Hub, 2023). In an interview concerning the 2024 general election in India, one individual candidly stated: "Christians will vote for Christians" (Today, 2023). The tendency to align with one's religious ideology and cultural identity is a common feature in politics, providing political leaders with a strategic advantage in appealing to voters during elections. This phenomenon is not limited to Hindu populist leaders but is observable across other religious communities as well. The challenge of accommodating diverse ideologies, cultures, and populations within party politics is particularly pronounced in the Northeastern region.

6. Conclusion

The rise of populism in Assam exemplifies a complex interaction of ethnic politics, economic constraints, and socio-cultural factors. Populist leaders initially build their support base by addressing local grievances and aspirations. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, the BJP secured nine out of fourteen seats in Assam, while the INC won three seats. The BJP's influence extended beyond Assam, winning two seats each in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. The preceding analysis highlights how politicians leverage issues of development, migration, and exclusionary politics to secure electoral advantages in the region. Simultaneously, the exclusion of Muslims from acquiring Indian citizenship through the NRC and CAA underscores significant flaws in the implementation of the CAA. Additionally, the potential granting of citizenship to Bengali Muslims is perceived as a threat by the indigenous Assamese communities, which could potentially trigger renewed unrest in the region. A recent statement concerning the floods in Guwahati, Assam, attributed responsibility to the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya (USTM), labelling the situation a "flood jihad" due to the institution's private ownership and Muslim affiliation (Baruah, 2024b). While development issues and social grievances have traditionally driven populist politics in the region, religion has increasingly become a potent force for mobilizing marginalized communities. The current context reveals a clear erosion of secular politics. Social media platforms have emerged as critical instruments for populist leaders, facilitating both inclusive and exclusionary political strategies. It underscores the intolerance towards other religions and communities, necessitating engagement for fostering peaceful co-existence and nation-building rather than perpetuating exclusionary ideologies. To mitigate the risks posed by populism and uphold the principles of liberal democracy, citizens play a crucial role in safeguarding their interests and fundamental rights. By comprehensively understanding the drivers and ramifications of populism in Assam, policymakers and researchers can formulate strategies to address underlying issues and foster inclusive and sustainable development in the region.

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About the Authors

Rakesh Mochahary is a research scholar at Christ (Deemed to be) University in Bengaluru, India, within the Department of International Studies, Political Science & History. He also serves as a senior research affiliate at the university's Centre for East Asian Studies (CEAS). His research primarily explores the culture, identity, and history of indigenous tribes and communities in Northeast India.

Loung Nathan K. K. (PhD) is an assistant professor of History at Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bengaluru, India. He earned his PhD from the Centre for Historical Studies (CHS) at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His specialization includes contemporary historical narratives, colonial/post-colonial histories in Northeast India, oral histories (folk tales and folklore), and spatial history.