

# **HINDUTVA AND THE MUSLIM ‘OTHER’: MODI’S POLITICS OF FEAR AND POPULIST DISCOURSE OF DIVISION**

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## **Author's Declaration**

I, the undersigned, Moldir Mukasheva, candidate for the MA degree in Political Science declare herewith that the present thesis titled “Hindutva and the Muslim ‘Other’: Modi’s Politics of Fear and Populist Discourse of Division” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person’s or institution’s copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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## Abstract

Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, came to power in 2014, India has witnessed the rise of cultural majoritarianism and religious nationalism known as *Hindutva*. *Hindutva* is an ideology that envisions India as a *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation). A key feature of *Hindutva* is its exclusivist nature, which frames religious minorities, particularly Muslims, as outsiders and foreigners in India.

This thesis contributes to the literature by systematic quantitative and qualitative content analysis of Modi's discursive strategies of 'religious othering'. Particularly, this thesis examines how 'religious othering' contributes to constructing India as a *Hindu Rashtra* by focusing on how Modi's discourse has changed over the course of his electoral campaigns in 2014, 2019 and 2024. The 'religious othering' is examined in conjunction with other elements of right-wing populism recurring in Modi's speeches to establish how it evolves and intensifies. The findings reveal not only a quantitative increase in religious othering over time but also the emergence of new rhetorical strategies in each electoral cycle that contribute to radicalizing the discourse and constructing Muslims as the main 'threat' and 'outsiders' in India.

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## Introduction

During a rally in Mahbubnagar, Telangana, on May 10, 2024, as a part of his electoral campaign Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated: “Congress wants to make Hindus second-class citizens in their own country. Is this why they are calling for vote jihad?” It was just one among many other controversial statements made by Modi about Muslims during this campaign. While news articles were proclaiming on the eve of the 2024 Indian general elections, “the world’s largest democracy votes” and “elections kick off in the world’s biggest democracy,” Modi’s electoral campaign continued to be fueled by hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric towards minorities residing in India, especially Muslims (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

India has witnessed the rise of cultural majoritarianism and religious nationalism under Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (hereafter, BJP) in the last decade (Islam, 2024; Sahoo, 2020; Vaishnav, 2019). As a party that was established on the ideological foundation of Hindu nationalism (also known as Hindutva) and with deep organizational and ideological ties to the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh organization (thereafter RSS) (Nair, 2008), the BJP has been largely criticized for promoting Hindu-nationalist rhetoric and policies at the expense of other religious minorities, particularly Muslims.

It has to be noted that according to the Constitution adopted in 1949, India was officially proclaimed a sovereign democratic republic. In 1976, through the 42nd Amendment, the Constitution was further amended to declare the nation as both secular and socialist (Basu, 2018, p.36). While the Constitution guarantees legal equality for all citizens regardless of religion or creed, the past decade has marked a significant departure from this principle.



While India is home to a diverse array of religious minorities, including Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists (Basu, 2018), particularly tensions between Hindus and Muslims due to the legacy of colonial rule and the trauma of Partition have been pronounced in shaping India's socio-political dynamics.<sup>2</sup> In this vein, the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the Hindu nationalist movement known as Hindutva. Characterized by its exclusivist outlook, Hindutva envisions India as a Hindu land, where only Hindus are accepted as legitimate inhabitants, who developed a prosperous Hindu civilization (Sharma, 2020, p. 44). While Hindu nationalism originally emerged in the 19th century during the struggle for national independence and developed throughout the 20th century, it acquired the status of a "hegemonic supremacist Hindu ideology" particularly when Narendra Modi came to power in 2014 (Singh, 2024, p.174).

Modi's rise to power has been followed by several controversial policies implemented at the national level, such as the revocation of Article 370 and the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, as well as anti-conversion laws passed in several BJP-controlled states, to name a few.<sup>3</sup> It has also increased polarization within Indian society, resulting in a rise in communal violence and mob lynching against minorities. Since 2014, communal violence has been provoked through religious processions and festivals, where Hindu nationalists chant anti-Muslim slogans (Siddiqui, 2024). Yilmaz and Morieson (2022) argue that under Modi's tenure, Hindutva went through a 'populist turn', manifested in the instrumentalization of the religious dimension of Hindu values and symbols (Singh, 2024). Human Rights Watch (2025) reports that since the BJP's rise to power, the

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<sup>2</sup> Partition refers to division of British India into two independent countries of India and Pakistan in 1947.

<sup>3</sup> Article 370 granted a special status to India's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir. The CAA fast-tracks the citizenship process for non-Muslim refugees from neighboring Muslim-majority countries, granting citizenship based on religious identity.

crackdown on religious minorities and harassment by Hindu nationalists has intensified, with a decade of repression weakening the rule of law and jeopardizing their human rights.

Modi's rhetoric has played a crucial role in this development, as he has successfully blended religion and nationalism. He has instrumentalized long-standing grievances among Hindu voters, who felt that their interests were compromised during India's secular state-building process under the Indian National Congress party (thereafter, Congress). Before the 2024 elections, a particular concern was the inauguration by Modi of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, which has long been a contested site in Hindu-Muslim relations. Previously known as Babri Masjid, a Muslim shrine in Ayodhya, it was demolished by a Hindu mob in 1992, resulting in the deaths of more than 2000 people (Solodkova & Antasheva, 2024, p. 560). The demolition resulted in a long lasting 'legal battle' between the religious communities until the verdict of the Supreme Court that gave the disputed site to Hindus in 2019 (Al Jazeera, 2019). However, due to democratic backsliding and decline of judicial independence under the BJP (Vaishnav, 2024), objectivity and independence of this decision have been significantly questioned, raising further concerns about the erosion of India's secularism.

By focusing on Modi's electoral campaigns in 2014, 2019, and 2024, this thesis aims to explore the nature of the discourse Modi employs to 'other' Muslims. It also seeks to assess whether there is an intensification of religious othering across these three campaigns. This discourse is situated within the broader theoretical framework of right-wing populism and is analyzed in comparison with other right-wing populist narratives present in Modi's rhetoric. By analyzing the content of speeches this research aims to uncover the extent and effect of anti-Muslim discourse in mobilizing electoral support and perpetuating the Hindu nationalist agenda. This research aims to primarily answer to two questions:

*RQ1: What discursive strategies does Modi employ to construct Muslims as the 'other' in his political speeches?*

*RQ2: How has the intensity and nature of Modi's othering discourse towards Muslims evolved across his consecutive terms in office?*

The study proceeds with the following structure: first, a detailed historical background is provided to contextualize current tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities in India. Second, a literature review of current studies on populism is presented to lay the foundations of the theoretical framework. Third, the elements of religious populism and their manifestation in India are discussed. Fourth, the methodology and data collection of the research are outlined in detail. Finally, the results of the analysis are presented and discussed, before the thesis concludes.

# Chapter 1: Understanding the Hindu-Muslim Relations

## 1.1 Historical background: the emergence of Hindutva

The complicated history of the Hindu-Muslim communities in India provided fertile ground for Modi's populist strategy to resonate with broader masses and mobilize Hindu voters. The tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities in India date back to colonial times. Waikar (2018, p.166) claims that grouping people into mutually antagonistic and monolithic religious categories is the legacy of colonialism, as the British aimed to prevent the unification of two groups against a common oppressor.<sup>4</sup>

The 'divide and rule' politics of the British is seen as the primary reason for the emergence of Hindutva. As Sharma (2020, p. 43) argues, Hindutva thinkers differentiated between *Indic* religions, those that originated in India (Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism) and Christianity and Islam. The need to differentiate between these religions was the result of the introduction of the Western term 'religion' in the census operations conducted by the British from the second half of the 19th century. Accordingly, it was assumed that one could belong to only one religion, while for Indian followers, the understanding of religious life was not exclusivist; hence, one could be a member of more than one tradition.

Indians who felt compartmentalized resisted this exclusivist conception by drawing a distinction between religion and culture. Therefore, in the founding ideological work of Hindutva, *Essentials of Hindutva*, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar referred to Hinduism not as a religion but as a culture that "unites four Indic religions," with Hindutva 'unifying' those "for whom India was the land of

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<sup>4</sup> This paragraph has been extracted from the research proposal I wrote for the course "Scope and Methods: Research Design and Techniques 2024/25 Fall".

both their birth and the birth of their religion” (Sharma, 2020, p. 43). Thus, Hindutva was formulated not as a religion but as a political movement with ethnic, cultural, and religious dimensions (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022, p. 11). Hindutva constructs all Indians as belonging to Hindu civilization “based on a common pan-Indian Hindu national identity” (Shani, 2021; p. 266). Hence, Muslims are depicted as ‘outsiders’, who either remain as ‘enemies’ to be externalized or assimilated to a Hindu national culture (Shani, 2021; p. 266). Accordingly, India as a person’s holy land (punyabhumi) and the land of their ancestors (pitribhumi) is a prerequisite for them to be considered Hindu, which meant that a Hindu could not be a descendant of other “alien invaders” (Thapar, 2000, p. 15, Rambachan, 2017, p.100).

Savarkar envisaged India as a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ or Hindu nation, which, however, totally excluded Muslims and Christians, as their religions did not originate in India. His conception of India can be traced in these lines:

We Hindus are bound together not only by the tie of the love we bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through our veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affections warm, but also by the tie of the common homage we pay to our great civilization — our Hindu culture (Savarkar, 2016, p. 108).

Hindutva actors nostalgically refer to the ‘golden age’ of India under Hindu civilization, portraying Muslims as ‘barbaric invaders’ and ‘outsiders’. This rhetoric represents contemporary Hindus as “inheritors of the past but claimants to the dominance in the present” (Thapar, 2014, p. 119). Through references to a golden Hindu past, Hindu identity is used to construct a clear moral binary between virtuous ‘us’ and bad ‘them.’ The Hindutva narrative represents the Muslim rulers of India as wicked, who forcibly converted Hindus to Islam and destroyed Hindu temples (Waikar, 2018, p. 168). They propagate the narrative that the Muslim invasion led to the darkest period, starting

from the invasion of Muhammad Bin Qasim to the Mughal Era.<sup>5</sup> However, Khilnani (2017) argues that destroying religious sites was carried out by both Muslim and Hindu rulers, as they were symbols of political and economic power.

## 1.2 The role of the RSS in rise of Hindutva

Inspired by the ideas of Hindutva ideology and founded with the impetus to carry out the idea of ‘Hindu Rashtra’, the RSS was established in 1925. RSS spread the hegemonic vision of India, in which non-Hindus must assimilate and subordinate to Hindu dominance. The RSS leader M.S. Golwalkar stated in 1939 that “the foreign races in *Hindustan* must...entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture... and may only stay in the country subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing...Not even citizen’s rights” (cited in Siddiqui, 2024, p.8). The organization primarily mobilized its followers by opposing Muslims as ‘others’ residing in India (Babar, 2023).

At the same time, the Indian Muslims were in the quest of autonomy from British rule as well. In 1906, a Muslim political party called all India Muslim League was formed (Banik, 2021, p.213). In 1909 the British government introduced separate electoral system based on a religion, according to which Hindu and Muslim candidates could vote for Hindu and Muslim representatives in local elections. This step played a crucial role in further cementing polarization across religious lines and identity politics.

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<sup>5</sup> Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent began in the 8th century, following the conquest of Sindh and Multan by Muhammad ibn al-Qasim. Muslim rule reached its largest and most influential extent under the Delhi Sultanate (13th–16th century) and the Mughal Empire (16th–19th century). The Mughal Empire began to decline in the 18th century and was formally dissolved by the British Raj after the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

Following nearly two centuries of colonial rule, the British “divided and quit India in 1947” (Talbot & Singh, 2009). Due to the mounting pressure in the face of series of violent clashes between communities and quest for independence after World War II, the Indian Independence Act was passed in 1947, dividing the country into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. The decision to divide the country was not only based on the irreconcilable tensions between communities and the fears of looming civil war but also due to the political rivalry between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League (which later became the ruling party of Pakistan).

However, the Partition quickly escalated into communal violence, particularly around the newly established borders, claiming the lives of approximately one million people and displacing around 12 million people (Yusin, 2009). The partition not only redefined geographical boundaries but also affected the representation of identities and communal relationships in both countries (Khan et al., 2024, p.147).

Following independence, the RSS became a powerful Hindu nationalist organization, successfully mobilizing its followers. It came under stricter government scrutiny following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 by former RSS member Nathuram Godse, who argued that Gandhi had allegedly favored the political demands of the Muslim community during the Partition. The tensions between the secular Congress government and the RSS exacerbated when the government banned the RSS during the Emergency rule proclaimed by Indira Gandhi in 1975 due to widespread strikes and mounting political opposition, which led the organization to elicit more support from Hindu voters (Mehdi & Mirza, 2024, p. 32). Additionally, the increasing revenue of predominantly Muslim Middle Eastern countries due to oil in the 1970s was instrumentalized by the RSS to create a sense of fear and animosity towards Muslims among Hindu population. It is

also argued that the government's decision to not comply with a uniform civil code across the country in the 1980s was seen as the appeasement to Muslims, inciting more hatred toward the minority (p.32). Hence, the RSS's primary mobilizing strategy was the 'othering' Muslims, portraying them as a threat and outsiders to Hindu society.

1980 marked another turning point for the Indian political system with the establishment of the BJP. The party traces its roots to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (thereafter BJS), which was a political wing of the RSS, established in 1951. After securing a substantial number of seats in the 1967 Lok Sabha elections, it later merged with several other parties and expanded into the Janata party, forming the government in 1977. However, the internal splits led to the collapse of the government in 1979, after which the BJS transformed itself into the BJP.

The RSS played an important role in the organizational formation of the BJP, with RSS cadres occupying key party positions: A.B.Vajpayee as the first President of the party and L.K.Advani as the General Secretary. However, Nair (2009) argues that in the initial years after the formation the BJP's main aim was to put an end to the monopolistic rule of the Congress, due to which it adopted an ideologically more neutral stance. Following the first election contested by the BJP in 1984, the party could not achieve significant results, while the Congress "gained from the sympathy wave generated by the assassination of Indira Gandhi" that took place earlier that year and secured the landslide victory (p.37). Hence, the BJP understood that playing a more secular card did not yield expected results and shifted its ideological stance towards more explicit Hindu identity.

The results of the BJP's ideological rebranding became evident in the 1991 general election, as the party achieved remarkable gains in states like Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi, while also expanding its support base in southern India (Nair, 2009, p.39). The 1991 electoral campaign has



strengthened the BJP ties with the RSS even more, with the election campaign revolving around the promise about the construction of Ram Temple in Ayodhya. The issue was portrayed as a sacred duty of the Hindu people, saying that “the demolition of Babri Masjid was not just an act of revenge but also a religious duty” (Setalvad, 2023). They spread the myth that the mosque was constructed after the demolition of the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram, and therefore it was the moral obligation of Hindus to ‘bring justice back’ by returning Ram’s birthplace.

The electoral success showcased the party a gold mine for voter mobilization, and the party kept rallying around the temple discourse. The apogee of this strategy was reached in 1992, when an RSS-led Hindu mob demolished the Babri Masjid to construct the Ram Temple. The BJP organized a rally, and prominent-BJP politicians delivered speeches in Ayodhya that day, fueling the Hindu mob to act.

### **1.3 2000’s and Modi’s Political Trajectory from Gujarat to National Power**

The mobilization around the demolition of the mosque significantly raised the popularity of the BJP, and the party formed a government in Gujarat in 1995, where Modi later became the chief minister. Modi’s attempt to consolidate Hindu identity was apparent back then. For example, he abolished the tradition of iftar gatherings (the evening meal with which Muslims break their fast during Ramadan month) which was carried out by all his predecessors. He also refused to grant scholarships funded by the central government to Muslim students. Additionally, for Muslims who wanted to attend Modi’s rallies, burqas and skull caps were handed out before entry so they could be easily recognized among participants, further deepening divisions in Indian society (Mehdi & Mirza, 2024).

Additionally, his tenure as chief minister resulted in an increase in communal violence, particularly against Muslims. This culminated in the Gujarat riots, one of the most violent riots in Indian

history, in which around 1,000 Muslims were killed. Jaffrelot (2003) called the riots ‘state-sponsored’, pointing out complicity of Modi’s government due to not preventing further violence, particularly attacks on Muslims by Hindus. The riots further fueled aversion toward Muslims. Despite condemnation and a temporary travel ban from the West, Modi’s popularity only kept growing.

When Modi first ran for Prime Minister in 2014, his rhetoric was less explicit, and he emerged as a man who would resolve India's economic problems, promising the 'development model of Gujarat.' Due to his association with the 2002 Gujarat riots, in the early years of his leadership, his rhetoric reflected a more restrained approach: he did not directly use inflammatory rhetoric toward Muslims but still othered Muslims by ignoring India’s Muslim past and frequently invoking the success of Hindu civilization (Waikar, 2018). The 2014 election resulted in the BJP securing 282 seats, which allowed the party to form the government for the first time since the 2004 general elections.

Especially following BJP’s electoral success in 2019, Modi no longer refrained from linking Muslims to terrorism, calling them 'infiltrators' aligned with Pakistan and further instrumentalized anti-Muslim sentiments among Hindu nationalist voters embracing the concept of 'love jihad'. 'Love jihad' refers to the conspiracy theory developed by Hindu nationalists that Muslims were trapping innocent Hindu girls and marrying them as a form of religious war (Mehdi & Mirza, 2024, p. 41). Additionally, several laws eroding Muslim identity have been enacted in both on national level and BJP-controlled states, such as the abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act, the ban on cow slaughter, and procedurally complicating inter-faith marriages. Apart from that, the government was accused of attempting to rewrite history narratives, as new school syllabi

have been based on a 'Hindu-first' narrative, where other cultural influences are portrayed as products of invasions.

Following the 2024 elections, although the BJP lost its outright majority for the first time in a decade, Modi was nonetheless reappointed as the prime minister and continues to enjoy broad popular support. The above-discussed temple discourse again played a significant role in mobilizing the electorate with the inauguration taking place before the start of the 2024 campaigning period. During the temple's inauguration, Modi said the day "heralded the advent of a new era" (Al Jazeera, 2024). Despite the controversy, he claimed to "congratulate every citizen of the country on this historic occasion" (BBC, 2024), portraying it as the achievement of one homogeneous nation.

The recent escalation of tensions in April 2025 due to the Pahalgam attack in Kashmir led to the most violent confrontation between India and Pakistan since 1971. It was reported that the government "demolished the homes of rebels accused of links to the Pahalgam attack, raided other homes across the region and detained approximately 2,800 people" (Al Jazeera, 2025). This attack poses a prospect of further crackdown not only in Muslim-majority Kashmir but might further worsen marginalization of the Indian Muslims in India.

Outlining the origins and rise of Hindutva and its intensification under the rule of Modi, the following chapter will evaluate more precisely Modi's strategy based on the literature on populism studies.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Defining populism and main approaches in populism studies

To define what ethno-religious populism means in the Indian context, I begin by outlining the main characteristics of populism and the primary approaches within populism studies. The proliferation of populist leaders over the last two decades has led to the emergence of various perspectives and approaches to the phenomenon. The most widely accepted definition of populism was provided by Cas Mudde (2004), who describes it as an ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite.’ In populist discourse, the common people are viewed as morally upright, and politics is expected to reflect their *volonté générale* or the general will.

Alongside the ideational approach, Laclau’s discursive approach has also been influential. According to this perspective, populism is a discourse that constructs ‘the people’ in opposition to the ‘others’, typically represented by the political and economic elite. In this approach, ‘the people’ have no fixed meaning; rather, their identity is shaped by the leader’s discourse. As Laclau argues, “the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to the identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader” (p.71). In this process, the leader’s name becomes a structural point of reference that represents not a specific agenda, but the very idea of unity itself.

In line with Laclau’s approach, Vasudeva (2025) argues that Modi’s personality operates as an empty signifier, and his discourse unites various constituencies under the broad ideological umbrella of Hindutva. Thus, rather than articulating a clear or consistent policy platform, Modi’s leadership symbolizes a general promise of national resurgence under Hindutva.

Weyland (2021) approaches populism as a political strategy, referring to it as a form of popular mobilization in which leaders directly engage with their followers. In this view, populism serves as a strategy for leaders to attain unrestricted power through unmediated and non-institutionalized mass support. Based on Weber's conception of charismatic authority, the leader's charisma plays a central role, manifesting as a personalistic style centered around a specific figure. This aligns with Modi's political strategy, which revolves around building a personality cult reinforced by BJP-controlled media and the intensified crackdown on opposition voices that criticize him (Ganguly, 2023).

Westheuser and Ostiguy (2024) define populism as a form of political connection between leaders and a social base, established through appeals that resonate within particular segments of society due to social, cultural, and historical factors. This socio-cultural approach emphasizes emotional appeal and highlights the significance of the 'high-low axis' in communication between a leader and the people. This axis includes non-verbal elements such as accent, body language, and clothing, alongside rhetoric. These components are rooted in a society's past, its current group divisions, and identities, helping the leader to establish a connection with a receptive audience. They serve as social cues allowing people to identify the leader as 'one of them.' In accordance with this approach, Vittorini (2022, p.290) argues that Modi attempts to portray himself as one of the common people through his humble short-sleeve kurta and a "calculated, sharp, uncluttered style and saintly look".

## **2.2 Horizontal populism, religion and the 'othering' in populist discourse**

As can be noted, the large amount of scholarly interest in populism has focused on the role of what Weber depicts as 'charismatic leadership' in mobilizing 'people'. More generally, populism can be categorized into two broader categories: vertical and horizontal. Vertical populism is based on the

idea of opposition between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. As Brubaker (2017, p. 1192) puts it, ‘the people’ are depicted as virtuous, struggling and hard-working, while ‘the elite’ is corrupt and self-serving. In this dichotomy, populist leaders claim to represent ‘the people’ and speak in their name. In Modi’s populist rhetoric, mainly the Congress party is constructed as the ‘corrupt elite’, detached from people’s concerns. Modi often accuses the party of favoring Muslims at the expense of the Hindu majority. Paradoxically, while the BJP itself represents a political elite, Modi successfully portrays himself as “an ascetic and the working-class *chaiwala*”; the voice of the Hindu people and their savior from both the corrupt elite and the ‘internal outsiders’ (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2022, p. 13). Urbinati (2019) argues that to overcome this paradox and manage the redemptive (i.e., being seen as an outsider, the representative of the common people) side of this strategy, populist leaders render themselves as embodiment of the people's will.

Particularly following the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, scholarly interest in the horizontal dimension has grown. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015) define populism as a thin-centered ideology which “pits a virtuous and homogeneous people” not only “against a set of elites” but also “dangerous ‘others’ who aim to deprive the common people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice” (cited in Marzouki & McDonnell, 2016, p.3).

According to Brubaker (2017), horizontal populism constitutes the opposition between “people like us, those who share our way of life, and those on the outside, who are said to pose a threat to our way of life” (p. 1192). He refers to these groups as “internal outsiders” since, despite being citizens of the state, they are not seen as truly belonging to it (p. 1192). In his definition of civilizational populism, Brubaker argues that populist leaders in Northern and Western Europe instrumentalize Christianity to construct fears of a civilizational threat from Islam. Thus, religion is instrumentalized in this context, as it is invoked as a signifier of *belonging* rather than *believing*

(p. 1206). Hence, it is void of any “ethical content or transcendental reference” (Gorski 2016, cited in Brubaker).

In the same vein, Marzouki and McDonnell (2016) argue that the populist use of religion is more about belonging than belief. Religion is operationalized to mobilize people to protect their native religious identities and symbols, which are perceived as being threatened by both elites and ‘the others’. Populist leaders, thus, merge the vertical and horizontal dimensions of populism: elites are portrayed as “disregarding the common people’s religious heritage”, while “the others” are depicted as trying to impose their religious values and norms on the native population (p.3). In this way, populists deploy a mixture of national, ethnic, class, regional, and religious identities to construct the antagonistic boundary of ‘us versus them.’ Religion, in this context, becomes a powerful tool to foster a sense of cultural crisis by “exploiting fears of the other” (McDonnell and Cabrera, 2019). For example, when analyzing how religion is hijacked in Hungary as discursive strategy of creating the distinction between the ‘self’ and ‘the other’, Sata (2021, p. 145) explains how Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban instrumentalizes Christianity as a “cultural or civilizational marker or a source of moral standing and legitimacy”. This strategy does not only “conceptualize Muslim migrants as aliens and foreigners who are culturally and religiously different” but also construct them as “threatening to Christian civilization” (p.146).

### **2.3 Muslims as the ‘Others’ in Indian context**

When it comes to horizontal populism in India, Singh (2024) argues that Hinduism has been hijacked by Modi to construct the narrative of a great Hindu nation, while portraying religious minorities as ‘outsiders’ to Hindu civilization. The secular elites, such as the Congress Party, are likewise depicted as being opposed to Hindu revival. Yilmaz and Morieson (2022, p. 13) claim

that to merge Hindutva with populism, Modi's BJP promotes a *civilizational* conception of India, in which Hinduism represents the "spiritual aspect of being Indian."

Since populism is considered a thin-centered ideology requiring attachment to a more substantive ideological framework, Hindutva serves as the thick ideology that complements it in the Indian context, blending religious and nationalist elements (Singh 2024, p.174). Modi's political discourse frames national identity in explicitly Hindu terms, linking Indian nationhood to adherence to Hindu cultural and religious values. Given this fusion of ethnic and religious identity in Modi's populist rhetoric, I argue that the term ethno-religious populism most accurately captures the nature of Modi's populist appeal.

Kinnvall (2019) contends that Modi, through his rhetoric, has created a sense of ontological insecurity among the Hindu electorate, rooted in a religious and 'masculinized' vision of nationalism. Ontological insecurity here refers to fostering a feeling that Hindu identity is under existential threat, thereby encouraging distrust towards the depicted 'others,' with Muslims being cast as the primary source of insecurity through discursive framing.

However, Vasudeva (2025) warns that focusing solely on how leaders hijack religion risks reducing it to a mere instrument of manipulation and fails to acknowledge how populists draw on deeply held identities, common historical narratives, and collective emotions. Therefore, she introduces the concept of 'political deification,' which she defines as "the attribution of divine qualities to a charismatic figure and the elevation of the leader to the status of a deity" (p. 138). This is evident in how Modi portrays himself as 'a politician sent by God,' not only embodying the aspirations of the people but also the spiritual values associated with Hindutva. Moreover, in this framing, *the people* themselves are sacralized, reinforcing the idea that Modi's political



authority and legitimacy are spiritual rather than merely political (p. 145). Through this strategic use of religion, Modi's leadership is cast as safeguarding India's spiritual and cultural heritage, positioning himself as the guardian of India's moral fabric.

By reinforcing the 'us versus them' divide and legitimizing Hindus as the *true* citizens and rightful owners of the nation, Modi reconfigures the idea of India as a Hindu civilization, effectively denying its Muslim past. The notion of a Golden Age of Hindu civilization, allegedly disrupted by Muslim invaders who oppressed Hindus and halted the nation's growth, is widely propagated. Consequently, everything associated with Hindu identity is portrayed as inherently good, while non-Hindu elements are seen as foreign and dangerous (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022, p. 14). This reflects the discourse of right-wing populist leaders, as argued by Wodak (2015), who notes that such leaders instrumentalize ethnic, religious, linguistic, or political minorities as scapegoats for most or all current social problems, constructing these groups as a threat to 'us' and fostering 'the politics of fear.'

The systematic cultivation of anti-Muslim sentiment through Modi's discourse over the past decade has turned Hindu religious populism into an effective political tool for dividing the electorate by invoking past traumas and constructing a 'historical enemy.' In accordance with the literature, I rely on the codebook presented in Table 1 to highlight the main elements of the right-wing ethno-religious populism within the discourse. While these are the main themes that are identified deductively, they will be supplemented with inductive sub-codes that I find during the analysis of campaign speeches.

**Table 1:** Identified themes for analyzing Modi's discourse

Theme	Definition
Good 'us'	Portraying the BJP and Modi as the authentic representatives of 'the people'.
Bad/evil 'them'	Depicting the various enemies as corrupt, anti-national, and disconnected from the concerns of 'the people'.
Crisis Narratives	Portraying India as being under constant threat (security, economy, identity, etc.).
Nationalism	Statements to glorify the nation and calls for national unity, such as those supporting the revocation of the special status of Muslim-majority populated Jammu and Kashmir.
Religious 'othering'/ Muslims as 'others'	Portraying Muslims as 'outsiders', either explicitly or implicitly, due to their religious identity.

### Chapter 3: Methodology and Data Collection

The core of this research is based on the analysis of Modi's electoral campaign speeches from the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha (general) elections. These speeches are particularly relevant as election campaigns serve as critical moments for populist leaders to mobilize voters and intensify political engagement (Immerzeel & Pickup, 2015). Due to the heightened emotional appeal during the rallies, it is particularly important to analyze how Modi frames Muslims during these periods.

Modi's speeches for each electoral period were collected from the official website, *narendramodi.in*. Specifically, 20 speeches from the 2014 campaign, 84 from 2019, and 79 from 2024 were selected. The limited number of speeches from the 2014 and 2019 electoral campaigns is due to availability constraints; hence, all publicly accessible speeches from both periods were retrieved. In 2024, a total of 158 speeches were publicly available; however, to ensure comparability across election years, a random sample of 79 speeches (every second speech) was selected for analysis. The average length of each speech ranges from approximately 3,500 to 4,500 words. The speeches for the 2014 campaigning period cover June 2013 until January 2014. June 2013 was chosen as the point of departure since Modi was appointed as the leader of the BJP's campaign for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections at this time. This made Modi the party's prime ministerial candidate, marking a turning point for the Chief Minister of Gujarat back then (Jaffrelot, 2015). The 2019 elections took place in seven phases, covering the period from April to May, with the intensified rallying period also falling within this timeframe. Lastly, the speeches from the 2024 electoral campaign cover the period from mid-March to June, while the elections themselves were held in seven phases between April and June.

As the speeches were delivered originally in Hindi, they were translated using Google Translate. To enhance the reliability of these translations, the texts were cross-checked with existing

academic analyses of Modi's speeches and Indian newspaper articles that quoted these speeches. Additionally, a couple of speeches were checked by a native speaker to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

The content of the speeches was examined using thematic analysis conducted with NVivo software. Coding through NVivo enabled a systematic overview of the data, facilitating analysis of the consistency of patterns within codes. Additionally, the software visualization tools allow the systematic comparison of codes' salience in each electoral campaign. The research relies on a deductive and inductive coding strategy. The coding categories were informed by existing literature on right-wing populism but also emerging patterns from the discourse. To ensure that coding was done properly, everything was double-checked, and the statements were re-coded where relevant.

While the main themes are kept the same across the analysis of the electoral campaigns, the subcodes under the themes were altered inductively, when required. For example, the theme 'good us' has a subcode 'Gujarat model' for the 2014 electoral campaign, as mobilizing people around achievements in Gujarat played an essential role in Modi's speeches. However, the 'Gujarat Model' rhetoric is largely absent in subsequent years. The same concern is valid for the theme of 'religious othering.' While in 2014, only the sub-code of 'vote bank politics' was present, in the latter years, Modi more explicitly made references to Hindu identity-related narratives or oppression of women by Muslim men, due to which new sub-codes were added. However, the main themes remained unchanged across the electoral campaigns, which helped ensure meaningful comparability over the years.

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative component is employed to assess the salience of religious ‘othering’ of Muslims in Modi’s speeches. In this vein, the study seeks to contextualize the religious othering by examining its relative increase compared to other populist thematic elements across the speeches. Therefore, the salience of other issues mentioned (i.e., the abovementioned corrupt elite, etc.) was also coded and analyzed.

The qualitative part stems not only from identifying themes based on the codes obtained after the analysis of speeches but also from interpreting the more subtle ‘othering’ strategies Modi uses in his speeches. For example, in many cases, instead of explicit discrimination against Muslims, he accuses the Congress party of tolerating terrorist attacks to appease its ‘vote bank,’ which often means Muslims residing in India. Hence, Modi ties terrorism to Muslim identity, implicitly othering the minority community.

Analyzing the content of speeches is essential, as discourse plays a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing social inequalities as argued by the scholars of Critical Discourse Analysis. Fairclough (2013, p. 9) claims that critical discourse analysis contributes to critical social analysis by focusing on discourse in relation to other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, etc.). Hence, this approach allows us to understand how “social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). Therefore, discourse analysis is not only about a given text/political speech but also the production and interpretation processes related to these texts. Both the way text is produced and interpreted are determined by social and cultural context, which includes given power dynamic and social inequalities.

Additionally, Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) argue that discursive practices are key in reinforcing the distinctions between ‘in-groups’ and ‘outgroups.’ Intra-group discourse may represent the ‘others’ in a negative way, leading to the reproduction of ethnic prejudices and ideologies (Van Leeuwen, 2000, p.88). I analyze Modi’s political discourse during the electoral campaigns to illustrate how language is used to construct and legitimize Hindu majoritarian dominance in India, while othering Muslims.

## Chapter 4: Analysis and results

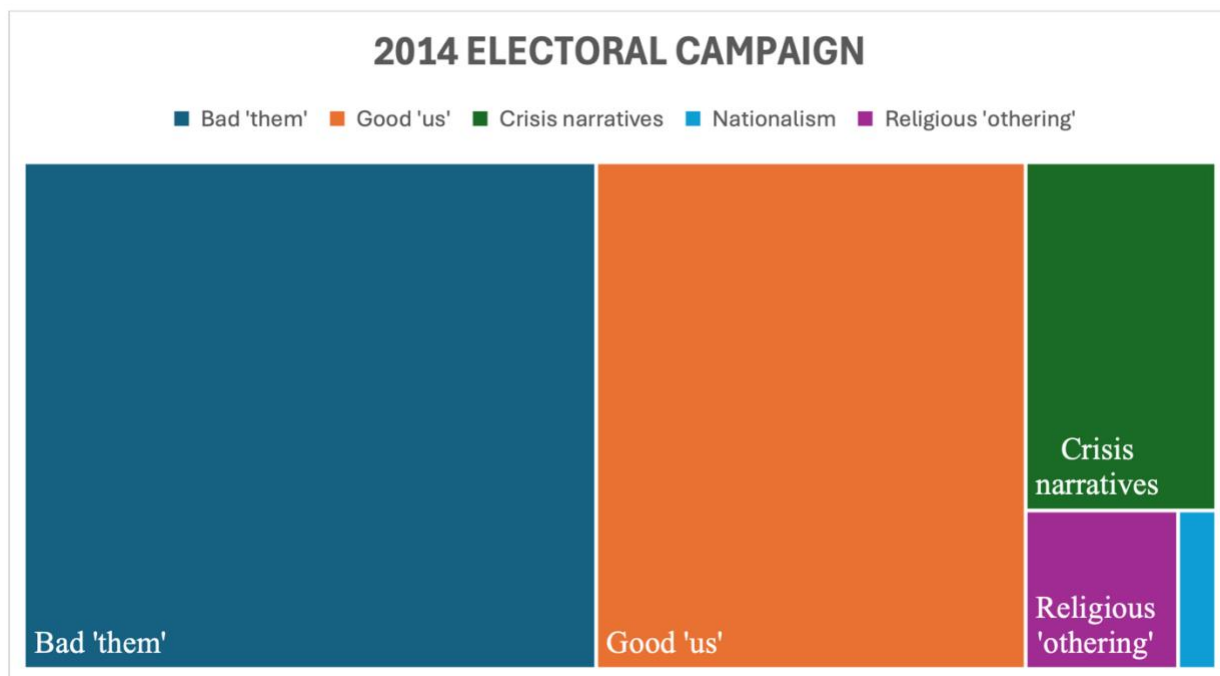
### 4.1 The 2014 electoral campaign: Incompetent UPA government vs. Development

Jaffrelot (2015) argues that what made the 2014 electoral campaign so unique within the Indian political system was the fact that, for the first time, a political party relied more heavily on the personality of its leader than on the party itself since Congress under Indira Gandhi. Indeed, Modi is at the forefront of the campaign, presenting himself as one of the ‘common people’ – a tea vendor turned politician, with a humble background – who promises to implement a development model akin to that of Gujarat.

The rhetoric of economic development is particularly salient, as the ruling coalition at the time, Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), faced mounting public pressure due to a series of corruption scandals (see Nayar, 2015). Chacko (2018) claims that the corruption exposés contributed significantly to the UPA government’s legitimacy crisis, alienating its traditional voter base. This legitimacy crisis was further exacerbated by a deepening economic crisis, marked by stagnating growth, rising fiscal deficits, depreciation of the rupee, and increasing inflation during the government’s second term (Chacko, 2018, p. 552).

The analysis of the 2014 electoral campaign reveals the following results:

**Figure 1:** The thematic structure of the 2014 electoral campaign analysis



This hierarchy chart reflects the salience of the main themes that emerged after coding all available speeches from the 2014 electoral campaign. As can be seen, the narratives of religious othering and nationalism were among the least utilized strategies in Modi's 2014 campaign. Instead, the campaign primarily revolves around economic issues, constructing a dichotomy between the 'good us', represented by the BJP and Modi, and the 'bad them', embodied by the UPA government, which was in power from 2004 until 2014 for two consecutive terms.

Crisis narratives are of utmost importance for populist leaders in mobilizing support. Therefore, the economic downturn of 2013 provided fertile ground for Modi to galvanize voters by blaming the government for rising inflation, devaluation of the rupee, and growing unemployment among the youth.

**Table 2** shows the sub-codes that were developed after the initial analysis of the speeches:



**Table 2:** Themes and sub-codes of the 2014 electoral campaign analysis

Theme	Sub-code	Description
Bad ‘them’	Corrupt elite	The UPA government led by the Congress is portrayed as corrupt, neglecting the population (including the poor, farmers, women, middle class, etc.), and focusing only on the ‘family politics’.
	Incompetent Congress	Congress, as the leader of the UPA government, is depicted as incompetent in handling the economy, which led the country into an economic recession.
	Authoritarian Congress	Congress is depicted as anti-democratic, suppressing dissent and criticism.
	Traitor Congress	Congress is portrayed as possessing a “divisive mentality”, i.e., dividing society based on religion and caste.
Good ‘us’	BJP as a people’s party	BJP is presented as the pro-development, good governance party, the only one capable of taking care of citizens.
	Gujarat Model	Statements about development of Gujarat achieved while Modi was a Chief Minister.
	Modi as a common man	Modi is portrayed as one of the common people, underlining his humble background and origins.
Crisis narratives	Terrorism and Pakistan	Statements about terrorism and the border tensions with Pakistan.
	External Threats	Statements about alleged threats to India’s sovereignty from neighboring countries as China.
Nationalism	Special status of Jammu and Kashmir/ Article 370	Statements questioning the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and implicitly calling for its revocation in the name of ‘national unity’.
Religious ‘othering’	Vote bank politics	National security is portrayed as being jeopardized by Congress’s politics of appeasement toward Muslims, which is referred to as ‘vote bank politics.’

The main sub-codes under the theme ‘bad them’ include portrayals of the UPA, and particularly the Congress party leading the coalition, as a ‘corrupt elite’ and an ‘incompetent elite’. These, representations depict the UPA government as detached from the concerns of the people, particularly the poor, and economically incompetent, leading to the country’s recession. Modi criticizes Congress for establishing what he termed “the rule of dynasty”, claiming that “the nation

needs freedom” from this regime (15 August 2013). For instance, in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, he stated:

In the same way, the Congress party starts praying to the poor when elections approach and think that this will take them across the tides of election! Friends, if they had the slightest of love or respect for the poor ... then after so many years of independence and after 45 years of dynastic rule, the poor would not be suffering this much. (December 22, 2013)

Instrumentalizing the corruption scandals surrounding the UPA, Modi also accuses the government of stealing from the nation and neglecting its development:

And what did they do? They just wiped off everything in ten years. Factories were being set up, even people from Gujarat set up factories here, the youth is being employed but I am surprised that the UPA government took away the facilities that Atal Ji gave to you!<sup>6</sup> (December 15, 2013).

Additionally, he accuses the government of failing to realize the country’s potential, claiming: “This country is not poor; this country can reach new heights, but unfortunately we got such governments which destroyed the country” (November 21, 2013). In some instances, he goes further, portraying the nation as being on the brink of economic collapse:

Friends, such problems, no food to eat, no cloth to wear, no shelter to live in, no education and no treatment for the ill... All these belongings are a legacy of Congress...! (August 11, 2013)

Two other, less salient sub-codes are ‘authoritarian Congress’ and ‘traitor Congress’. In the former, Modi accuses Congress of undermining democratic traditions, suppressing criticism and dissent, and being “afflicted with an authoritarian mindset” (June 9, 2013). He claims that Congress

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<sup>6</sup> Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a co-founder and first president of the BJP. He also served as a Prime Minister of India three terms.

downplays the role of the Constitution and institutional checks and balances, instead centralizing power and eroding accountability (January 18, 2013).

When portraying Congress as a traitor, Modi blames the party for employing a ‘divide and rule’ strategy, asserting that it perpetuated “the politics of discrimination and separation, which has destroyed the nation” (December 1, 2013). Hence, Congress is blamed for inciting polarization along the lines of religion, caste, cults, and communities, while the BJP, by contrast, is portrayed as “working on the principle of unity” (November 29, 2013). Within this rhetoric, one can trace how Modi constructs society in Manichean terms of ‘us versus them’, where Congress is held responsible for all present injustices, while the BJP is positioned as the only party that genuinely promotes unity and development, representing the ‘good us’.

In contrast to the ‘incompetent’ Congress, which is blamed for deteriorating the country’s economy, the BJP is portrayed as a pro-development party that would free India “from the state of trust deficit” (August 15, 2013). At the same time, the BJP is identified with the entire nation: “...we move ahead with 125 crore dreams in total; if every city, every village has a dream, you can imagine that if we all move ahead with these crores of dreams for 8 years, then our country can reach new heights”.<sup>7</sup> Development-related achievements in BJP-controlled states are particularly emphasized in contrast to the “Delhi government,” from whose “hands” the country must be “freed” to “move ahead” (December 20, 2014).

Analyzing the discourse confirms that according to Jaffrelot (2015), the catchphrase of the 2014 electoral campaign was *‘development’*. Amidst the deepening economic crisis, Modi portrays

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<sup>7</sup> Crore is a unit of measurement in India, that equals to the quantity of ten million. For example, in this context ‘125 crore’ means one billion two hundred fifty million people.

himself as the “development man”, drawing on his record of achievements in Gujarat (p. 152). Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding the so-called ‘Gujarat Model’ played an important role in the campaign (44 references), with Modi promising to deliver at the national level the same kind of development that Gujarat had achieved under his leadership as Chief Minister:

What we have done in Gujarat is set the speed with which we want to progress. We have set goals, directions and plans to achieve them. We have set very strict standards to judge our performance. It is because of this reason that today we have the least number of unemployed people in India as per the report of the government of India’s own departmental study.

Additionally, Modi portrays himself as a representative of the common people, emphasizing his humble background of coming from a poor family. He positions himself as a worker (*kaamdaar*) and a servant (*sevak*) dedicated to the welfare of the ‘people’, in contrast to the detached Congress elites, whom he refers to as *naamdaar* (dynasts) and *shasak* (rulers) (January 19, 2013). This underscores the elite vs people antagonism of the vertical populist discourse.

The crisis narratives that Modi employs in his 2014 electoral campaign revolve around issues of terrorism and border tensions with Pakistan in addition to the omni-present economic crisis. More explicitly, he invokes incidents such as Pakistani soldiers “beheading” Indian soldiers due to the perceived inaction and idleness of the ‘Delhi government’, which have jeopardized the safety of the nation (September 26, 2013).

Alongside the threat from Pakistan, Modi also highlights dangers posed by other countries on Indian soil. For example, he refers to China, which he claims had “entered India” and “created a space for themselves” (August 11, 2013). He portrays India as “being surrounded by dangers every

day,” with not only Indian soldiers being killed but also local fishermen being “abducted” by foreign powers.

Mobilizing people around a crisis narrative is a common *modus operandi* of populist leaders, as crises, whether real or perceived, enable populists to construct a dichotomy between the ‘people’ and those deemed responsible for the crisis (Moffitt, 2016, p. 121). Thus, by instrumentalizing crisis rhetoric, Modi is able to present himself as a capable leader who could offer solutions to protect India from these threats, while portraying the UPA government as the main party responsible for the country’s woes.

Finally, regarding nationalism and religious othering, nationalist discourse is advanced through statements concerning Article 370, which granted special status to the Muslim-majority region of Jammu and Kashmir. Particularly, Modi questions whether the article “has been beneficial for the common man” (December 1, 2013). Although Modi does not aggressively advocate for the revocation of Article 370 during the 2014 campaign, he nonetheless raises doubts about its necessity for *the entire nation*, which in this discourse is represented by Hindus.

Religious othering is manifested in Modi’s critique of the UPA government’s alleged appeasement politics through the so-called ‘vote bank’. As Thakur (2014) explains, the term ‘vote bank’ refers to the perception that Indian Muslims vote ‘en bloc’ and are thus treated by political parties primarily as a monolithic electoral bloc that can be bought. Modi’s discourse frames ‘vote bank’ politics as a deliberate strategy of favoritism that undermines national unity. Moreover, this narrative is fueled by conspiracy theories about Muslim infiltrators who ‘intrude’ upon the national borders, but are ignored to gain the Muslim ‘vote bank’:

This Delhi Government can't protect our nation. Friends, you will be shocked to know that, The Sultanate of Delhi, indulging in petty vote bank politics, is ignoring the security of our nation. Our soldiers who are at Bangladesh border, they have been asked to refrain use of armaments if some Bangladeshi tries to intrude national boundaries. Not only this, they also have orders that if the attack or the attempts of infiltration are strong, then they should not combat them but should allow that infiltration...!

Hence, the lack of national security is directly tied to the Congress's alleged attempts to "please its vote bank", with appeasement of Muslims depicted as the primary cause of this danger. Furthermore, in some instances, Modi refers to the Congress as the "Sultanate of Delhi," asserting that it has broken the trust of the "common man". The references about the 'Sultanate of Delhi' are made in negative contexts, invoking negative associations with Muslim rule on the Indian sub-continent. Consequently, both the Congress and Indian Muslims are 'othered' as enemies that do not truly belong to India.

Additionally, Modi presents the 'vote bank' as a disease to which "every corner {of India} has become a prey" and which "demolished society into pieces" (September 15, 2013), implicitly portraying Muslims as a threat destroying Indian society. The government's "addiction to vote bank politics" is framed as the principal cause of underdevelopment, with the Delhi government being accused of having "no interest in changing the fate of India" (November 21, 2013). To further delineate the division between the 'real people' and 'the others', Modi claims that in attempting to appease outsiders, the government is stealing from those who 'truly belong to India'.

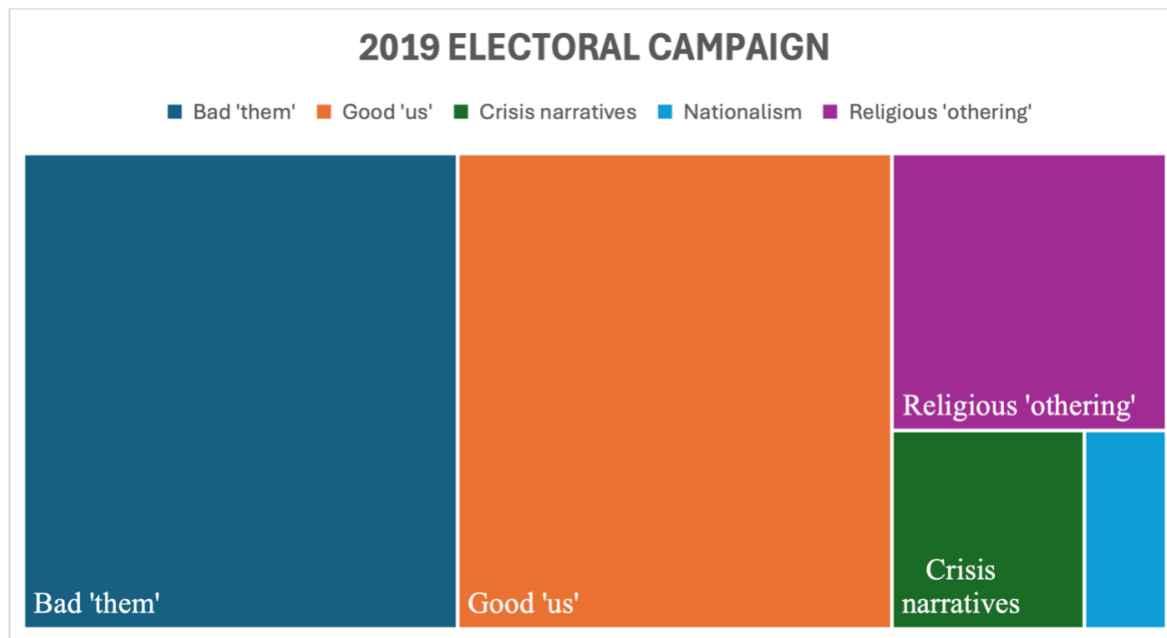
To conclude, during the 2014 electoral campaign, Modi primarily relies on mobilizing support by constructing a dichotomy of a 'good people' versus a 'bad elites.' The 'good us' is represented by the BJP as the pro-development party committed to economic improvement and the welfare of the people. Conversely, the 'bad elites' is embodied by the then-governing UPA coalition, portrayed

as corrupt, selfish, and economically incompetent, who betrays the nation to secure the ‘block vote’ of ‘outsiders’. The conflict is mainly economic, Modi’s experience as the Chief Minister of Gujarat played a central role in his rhetoric, as he sought to showcase Gujarat’s achievements as a model of development in contrast to the underdevelopment under the UPA.

#### **4.2 The 2019 electoral campaign: Securitization and fight against terrorism**

The escalation of India-Pakistan tensions in February 2019 set the tone of this campaign, with Modi capitalizing on presenting himself as the protector of the nation against terrorism. To be more precise, on February 14, 2019, a deadly attack claimed by the Pakistan-based Islamist group Jaish-e-Mohammad killed 46 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (BBC, 2019). In response, Modi ordered strikes to be carried out on Pakistani territory. While the counter-attack delivered mixed results, with the Indian Air Force losing a plane and a pilot (who was, however, later returned to India), and mistakenly shooting down one of its own helicopters, Modi portrayed himself as a strongman, a fighter against terrorism, and a protector of the nation (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020, p. 158).

**Figure 2:** The thematic structure of the 2019 electoral campaign analysis



**Figure 2** presents the main themes revealed by the analysis of the 2019 electoral campaign, while **Table 3** outlines the inductive sub-codes developed after the initial analysis of the speeches.

**Table 3:** Themes and sub-codes of the 2019 electoral campaign analysis

Bad 'them'	Corrupt elite	The opposition parties are portrayed as corrupt and detached from concerns of 'the people'.
	Traitor Congress	The Congress party is portrayed as appeasing to Pakistan, hence endangering national security.
Good 'us'	BJP as a people's party	BJP is presented as the pro-development, good governance party, the only one capable of taking care of citizens.
	Modi as a common man	Modi is portrayed as one of the common people, underlining his humble background and origins. Additionally, development related achievements are personified, as a strategy to bypass institutions and establish direct proximity with 'the people'.
Crises Narratives	Fight against terrorism	Modi is depicted as the protector of the nation, who successfully fights against terrorism and brings security.
Nationalism	Article 370	Attacking opposition (particularly, the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, Congress and Trinamool Congress) for alleged calls for a separate Prime Minister in Jammu and Kashmir.



		Additionally, the code includes statements criticizing the Congress for calling to reduce the powers of the army under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which grants the military authority to implement extraordinary measures in ‘disturbed areas’ of Jammu and Kashmir.
Religious ‘othering’	Vote bank politics	National security is portrayed as being jeopardized by Congress’s politics of appeasement toward Muslims, which Modi refers to as ‘vote bank politics’.
	CAA	Calls for the Citizenship Amendment Act, which fast-track citizenship for non-Muslim religious refugees from neighboring Muslim-majority countries.
	India as Hindu land	References to Hindu deities and symbolic figures to evoke the memory of ancient India and portray the country as inherently Hindu.
	Glorifying and protecting Hindu identity	Belonging to Hindu identity is portrayed as inherently non-violent and therefore morally superior, and as an identity that must be protected from the danger of ‘infiltrators’.
	Triple talaq	Muslim girls are being depicted as ‘oppressed’ due to the custom of triple talaq. <sup>8</sup>

As can be observed, the dichotomy between the ‘good us’ versus the ‘bad them’ still occupies an important part of the campaign. Under the theme of ‘good us’, the same sub-codes regarding the self-depiction of the BJP as ‘the people’s party’ and ‘Modi as a common man’ are present. In the first sub-code, statements portraying the BJP as a pro-welfare and good governance party are included.

In this campaign the ‘representation of Modi as a common man’ strategy goes beyond merely focusing on his humble background or portraying himself as the servant of the nation. Like Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, where the sovereign embodies the collective will, Modi also presents himself as the incarnation of the will of the nation, claiming a direct and unmediated connection with the

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<sup>8</sup> Islamic tradition according to which Muslim man could legally divorce his wife by saying three times consequently the word ‘talaq’.

people (Barber 2019, p. 130) and saying: “But these *Mahamilavtis* do not realize that Modi is here today because of the blessings of 130 crore Indians” (May 15, 2019). Additionally, a personification of achievements is present, something that was largely absent in the previous electoral campaign. While speaking about the good governance promoted by the BJP, Modi this time presents development-related achievements as solely his own, saying: “I have been able to provide electricity to every village and every house only with your blessings.” (April 17, 2019). As in the 2014 electoral campaign, the ‘bad them’ theme consists of accusing the opposition parties, mainly Congress, of being either corrupt or betraying the nation by “remaining entangled only in paperwork” (April 11, 2019), while “Pakistani terrorists kept attacking” (May 10, 2019) and “giving rise to terrorism and Naxalism in the country” (May 12, 2019). Attacking the opposition parties for being “anti-national” (April 12, 2019) and siding with Pakistan, Modi claims: “When India kills the enemy with a bang... then these people are talking in favor of Pakistan... These parties have not only helped terrorism. They have also put your life and your existence in danger” (April 5, 2019). Hence, the ‘traitor opposition’ rhetoric is framed through a securitization narrative, with a strong emphasis on the issue of terrorism.

As discussed above, the escalation of border tensions between the two countries provided Modi with fertile ground to capitalize on the fight against terrorism. What was once framed as a looming danger from Pakistan during the 2014 electoral campaign, decisively turns into the successful combat of terrorism under the BJP and Modi. Modi employs harsh rhetoric, often declaring that “India [is] killing Pakistani terrorists by entering their homes” (April 10, April 11, April 12, April 17, May 8, May 10, May 11, May 17, to name a few). In this narrative, the BJP and Modi are portrayed as the only legitimate providers of national security:

When you press the button on the lotus symbol, you are not just pressing your finger. You are pressing the trigger to shoot terrorists in the chest. When you press the button on the lotus symbol, you are doing this work so that the tricolor flag is seen high in the world. When you press the button on the lotus symbol, you press the button for the safety of the mothers and sisters of the country (May 17, 2019).

In light of this securitized discourse, ‘religious othering’ is also more prominent compared to the 2014 campaign, with new strategies emerging. While in 2014 it was primarily present through references to ‘vote bank politics’, the following sub-codes were added:

a) *Citizenship Amendment Act*

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is widely perceived as one of the BJP government’s main attempts to redefine Indian citizenship and transform the country into a *Hindu Rashtra* (Ranjan & Mittal, 2023, p. 463). At its core, the Act makes religion a basis for granting citizenship. It fast-tracks the path to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim refugees, who fled persecution from neighboring Muslim-majority countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan and arrived in India by December 31, 2014 (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The CAA was passed after the BJP’s re-election in December 2019.

Modi presents the CAA as a “law for those who have faith in Mother India and have been forced to come here from Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir” (April 14, 2019) and as a protection for “the children of Maa Bharti” (April 20, 2019). The use of the term “Mother India” is significant, as it is essentially a Hindutva-affiliated concept, frequently evoked by RSS leader Mohan Bhagwat (Thakur, 2025). Thus, the Act is framed as being for the people of a Hindu-dominated “Mother India,” implicitly delegitimizing the Muslims residing on this land.

b) *India as a Hindu land*

Unlike in 2014, references to Hindu identity-related concepts are more prominent. For example, Modi begins speeches by invoking sacred figures from Hinduism: “I bow to the land of the brave Karna” (April 11, 2019) and “...my salutations to the land of Maa Kali and Lord Shiva” (April 20, 2019). Such statements contribute to constructing India as fundamentally Hindu land, while ignoring the presence of Muslims by exclusively invoking Hindu deities and symbols. Moreover, references to “*Hindustan*” appear several times throughout the campaign, directly reflecting a vision of India solely as the ‘Hindu land.’ For instance, at a rally in Indore, while attacking the opposition, Modi claims: “Congress and its *Mahamilavati* allies do not have the right to remain in public life even for a day in the public life of *Hindustan*” (May 12, 2019).

*c) Glorifying and protecting Hindu identity*

Alongside references to India as ‘*Hindustan*,’ Modi also addresses the issue of Hindu terrorism, which Jaffrelot & Verniers (2020, p.160) define as the “most dramatic use of communal rhetoric.” Modi portrays the Hindu people as morally pure and incapable of terrorism, claiming that on their “tradition of thousands of years and great culture, the world has never raised a finger” (April 20, 2019). He attacks Congress for “committing the sin of insulting Hindus” (April 1, 2019), questioning whether “in the history of thousands of years” there has been “even a single incident of a Hindu ever committing terrorism” (April 1, 2019).

Hence, while Muslims are presented as either terrorists or the disseminators of vote bank politics that endanger national security, Hindus are depicted as morally pure and righteous. Within this securitized discourse, Modi also speaks of a ‘new *Hindustan*’ led by “a strong government which attacks (terrorists) by entering their houses” and whose “mind ... thinks for 125 crore Indians”

(May 1, 2019). Thus, the entire population is homogenized as part of this ‘new *Hindustan*,’ clearly defining who belongs to ‘us’ and who are the ‘others.’

The protection of Hindu identity against ‘infiltrators’ is also emphasized, particularly in the context of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) enacted by the BJP government in Assam. According to the NRC, all residents of Assam are required to provide physical proof of citizenship (Sahoo, 2020, p. 15). However, it was largely seen as a tool to deprive Muslim migrants from Bangladesh of citizenship, as Assam receives most of its migrants from Bangladesh. Together with the CAA, which grants citizenship based on religious identity, NRC and CAA are evaluated as one of the main steps to consolidate India as a Hindu land. This is evident in Modi’s discourse as well, as he frames the objective of the NRC as “identifying infiltrators” (April 7, 2019), presenting it as a necessary measure to safeguard national borders and Hindu identity from ‘outsiders’ and ‘threats’.

#### *d) Triple talaq*

Abdou (2017) argues that right-wing Western European populist leaders’ endorsement of gender equality norms is predominantly instrumental, serving as a rhetorical tool to advance anti-Islam agenda. When talking about ‘gendered anti-Muslim racism’ and ‘gendered culturalism’, Vieten (2016) discussed how European right-wing populist leaders’ ‘pseudo-emancipatory’ discourse is not genuinely concerned with gender equality but rather instrumentalizes Muslim women’s ‘supposed victimhood’ to reinforce the superiority of Western civilization.

In the same vein, Modi presents Muslim girls being oppressed and “enduring atrocities like triple talaq” (April 14, 2019) – a practice that allowing Muslim men to divorce their wife by saying talaq three times consecutively. Presenting himself as the savior, he promised to ‘save’ Muslim girls by passing a law that would abolish this. This narrative is pseudo-emancipatory as the BJP itself

promotes ‘traditional’ gender roles for women, according to which women are expected to maintain traditional roles as caretakers and homemakers (Gupta, 2024).

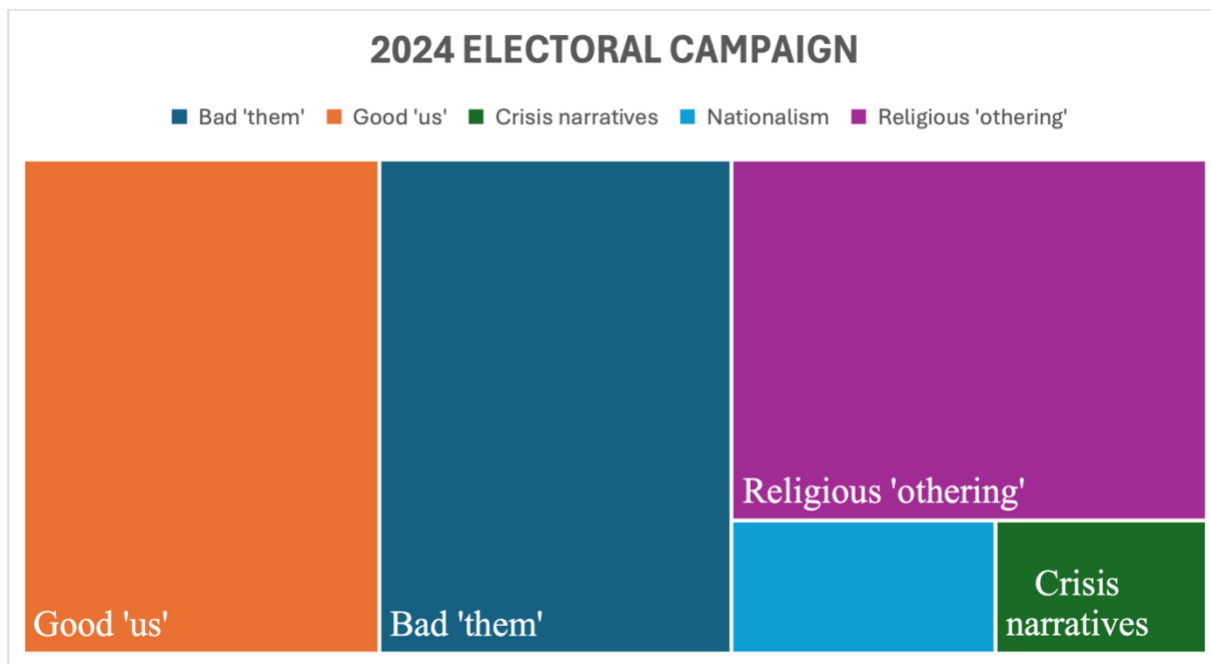
Indeed, after the BJP secured its majority in Lok Sabha, the government passed a bill ‘Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Marginal Bill’, which Modi heralded as a ‘victory of gender justice’ in his twitter account (Siddiqui, 2021, p.28). Citing the survey research conducted by the Center for Research and Debates in Development Policy (CRDDP), Siddiqui (2021, p.10) shows that among the 20,671 Muslims surveyed, 311 divorces were reported, among which only one case has been reported as an oral triple talaq. Moreover, the bill eventually did not grant women the equal right to divorce but merely ended up “equating the gender justice with the criminalization of Muslim men” (p.28). In this light, Modi’s rhetoric as well can be evaluated as a ‘pseudo-emancipatory’, in which the image of oppressed Muslim women is instrumentalized to depict the BJP and ‘being Hindu’ as champions of gender equality at the expense of Muslim tradition.

To conclude, compared to 2014, the 2019 electoral campaign featured significantly more references to religious othering. While Modi’s 2014 campaign primarily relied on *vote bank politics*, the 2019 campaign adopted new strategies and Modi’s 2019 discourse was more securitized, emphasizing *the politics of fear* and framing national security in a way that further marginalized the Muslim community.

#### **4.3 The 2024 electoral campaign: Protecting ‘our’ faith against the Vote Jihad**

In the 2024 campaign, the discourse of the good ‘us’, represented by the pro-development BJP delivering welfare schemes, against the corrupt, looting opposition still played an essential role. However, unlike in previous years, this campaign has a stronger emphasis on religious ‘othering’, with a significant rise in hate speech directed towards Muslims, as depicted in Figure 3.

**Figure 3:** The thematic structure of the 2024 electoral campaign analysis



**Table 4** presents the sub-codes developed after the initial analysis:

**Table 4:** Themes and sub-codes of the 2024 electoral campaign analysis

Bad 'them'	Corrupt elite	The opposition parties are portrayed as corrupt and detached from concerns of people.
	Traitor Congress	The Congress is portrayed as appeasing to Pakistan, hence endangering national security.
Good 'us'	BJP as a people's party	BJP is presented as the pro-development, good governance party, the only one capable of taking care of citizens.
	Modi as a common man	Modi is portrayed as one of the common people, underlining his humble background and origins. Additionally, development related achievements are personified, as a strategy to bypass institutions and establish direct proximity with 'the people'.
Crises Narratives	Fight against terrorism	Modi is depicted as the protector of the nation, who successfully fights against terrorism and brings security.
Nationalism	Article 370	The revocation of Article 370 is depicted as the fulfillment of the Constitution and a step toward national unity.

Religious ‘othering’	Vote bank politics	Muslims are portrayed as conspiring with the Congress to 'snatch' the property and reservations of ‘people’.
	Muslims as ‘invaders’	Muslims are portrayed as 'barbaric invaders' through the selective references to historical narratives.
	CAA	Depicting the CAA as a solution to the injustices inherited from the Partition period.
	India as Hindu land	References to Hindu deities and symbolic figures to evoke the memory of ancient India and portray the country as inherently Hindu.
	Glorifying and Protecting Hindu identity	Depicting the inauguration of the temple as a 500-year-long battle and a national achievement. Additionally, statements that present the Hindu identity and faith as being under threat due to infiltrators are present.
	Triple talaq	Modi portrayed as the savior of Muslims girls from “atrocities of triple talaq”.

#### *a)Vote bank politics*

When talking about vote bank politics, Modi refers to an alleged conspiracy between the opposition parties (mainly Congress) and Muslims, according to which they (opposition parties) “will snatch the entire reservations of Dalits, backwards, {and} tribals” and “distribute it among their vote bank of vote jihad” (May 10, May 11, May 12, May 15, May 17, May 22, to name a few). Muslims are portrayed as thieves who, in cooperation with opposition parties, will “loot {the} rights” of socially disadvantaged groups (May 20, 2024). In particular, Modi refers to an alleged decision made by the Congress government in Karnataka, according to which “all the people of the Muslim community,” “no matter how rich” and “educated they were,” were made “OBC overnight” (April 26, 2024).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The term Other Backward Classes (OBC) refers to communities identified as being socially or educationally disadvantaged.



In fact, according to the reservation structure in Karnataka, certain sections of the Muslim community qualify for reservations and are recognized as Other Backward Classes (OBC) due to their social and educational background. A quota of 4% was introduced in Karnataka as a reservation for Muslims in 1995 (India Today, 2024). However, when Karnataka came under a BJP-led state government in 2019, this quota for Muslims was scrapped and redistributed to two Hindu communities (Nair, 2025). Later, this decision was put on hold by the Supreme Court. When the Congress returned to power in the state after the local elections in 2023, it reinstated the 4% OBC reservation for Muslims.

In addition, Modi discusses how the Congress party announced that they “will bring X-rays if they form the government,” and that “whatever property you have, these people will snatch it and give it to their vote bank” (April 27, 2024). Hence, the Congress electoral manifesto is said to bear “the stamp of the Muslim League” (May 2, 2024), as the party allegedly wants to “impose the ideas of the Muslim League at that time on India today” (May 6, 2024). Through this rhetoric, Modi evokes memories of ‘the painful past’ by linking the alleged cooperation between the opposition and Muslims to the pre-Partition Muslim League’s legacy. This historical reference constructs both the Congress and Muslims as traitors and separatists who aim to divide the country. It is important to note that in this campaign, Modi also refers to Muslims as the “vote bank of vote jihad,” a phrase that echoes other conspiracy theories, such as the aforementioned ‘love jihad’, and frames Muslims as being engaged in a ‘religious war’ against Hindus (Allie, 2025, p.85).

#### *b) Glorifying and protecting Hindu identity*

The second largest sub-code in the discourse is glorifying and protecting Hindu identity. Particularly, the discourse about the newly inaugurated Ram temple plays an important role. Modi describes the inauguration of the temple as addressing a ‘historical grievance’:

After a wait of 500 years, Lord Rama has finally been seated in his magnificent temple. And just a few minutes later, Lord Rama's birth anniversary will be celebrated in the Ram Mandir in the holy city of Ayodhya by applying Surya Tilak to him. Today the country is celebrating the culmination of centuries of penance, the sacrifice of generations (April 17, 2024).

As can be seen, the inauguration of the temple is depicted as a national achievement celebrated by the whole country, with Modi clearly delineating that only those who worship Lord Ram are 'legitimate' citizens of the country. Additionally, the inauguration is portrayed as the culmination of a centuries-long struggle and "a big moment of our civilization" (May 26, 2024), which not only fosters a sense of shared purpose but also clearly delineates those constructed as 'outsiders' in this symbolic battle. In this discourse, we can see how 'othering' transcends the national terms and is built in civilizational terms, pitting the 'sacred Hindu civilization' against Islam (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2022). In the same vein, the opposition parties are blamed as "anti-national" as those who contributed to the historical injustice by "creating hurdles" (April 8, 2024) and complicating the realization of the "500-year-old dream" (April 4, 2024).

In addition to that, Modi claims that Hindu identity is in danger due to the opposition, which is "inviting infiltrators and settling them" in the name of its vote bank (May 20, 2024). Muslims are portrayed as dangerous 'others' who allegedly want to undermine security and destroy Hindu identity. For example, Modi says:

Friends, it has become difficult to follow our faith in Jharkhand today. The idols of our deities are being broken. Infiltrators with Jihadi mentality are attacking in groups and the Jharkhand government is sitting with closed eyes, supporting them from behind. These infiltrators have endangered the safety of our sisters and daughters in the state (May 14, 2024).

*c) Muslims as 'invaders'*

Another novelty of this campaign is that Modi presents Muslims as invaders by referring to historical injustices. Muslims are constructed as historical aggressors who exerted military domination and intentionally destroyed sacred sites. Hence, they are framed as ‘barbaric invaders’ and enemies to the cultural and religious legacy of the Hindus:

When the Mughals used to attack here, they were not satisfied with defeating the king, they were not satisfied until they destroyed temples, until they destroyed places of worship, they enjoyed doing that (April 12, 2024).

*d) India as Hindu land, triple talaq and CAA:*

At the same time, the sub-codes of ‘Hindu identity narratives’, ‘triple talaq’, and ‘CAA’ are also present. Regarding Hindu identity narratives, there is a noticeable increase in religious references. In fact, Modi starts almost every second rally by referring to Hindu deities or symbolic figures, which constructs India as a Hindu Rashtra. In addition to that, Modi recalls prominent Hindu nationalists who passed away to remind the history of the movement and resonate with the Hindutva activists attending the rally (Wyatt, 2024, p. 6).

When it comes to triple talaq, Modi portrays himself as the savior of Muslim girls, who “ended their atrocities” (May 10, 2024). As it was mentioned in the previous section, this strategy helps depict being Hinduness as emancipatory in terms of gender rights while rendering Islam as oppressive. In the same vein, the CAA, for which Modi was advocating in the 2019 electoral campaign and was passed in the aftermath, is framed as a solution to the injustices created by the Partition, while the opposition is claimed to “spread lies about the CAA due to the politics of appeasement” (May 28, 2024).

Regarding nationalistic rhetoric, statements about Article 370 are present. This time, the revocation of the Article is portrayed as the “wall” that has been “demolished” (April 12, 2024), proclaiming

it as the “biggest event in the life of Indian democracy” (May 14, 2024). The article, which granted autonomy over internal affairs to the Muslim-majority populated Jammu and Kashmir, is framed as the reason that “burned the country in the fire of terrorism for years” (April 27, 2024) and as an obstacle on the way to national unity.

To sum up, the 2024 campaign reveals a marked dominance of religious ‘othering’ discourse, unlike previous years. In this electoral campaign, the ‘othering’ strategy extends beyond security narratives and includes conspiracy theories portraying Muslims as having the intent to snatch the rights and properties of the population. Additionally, the inauguration of the Ram Temple in January 2024 and its portrayal as a ‘civilizational achievement’ played a significant role in externalizing Muslims as ‘outsiders’.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

As explained by the existing literature on the rise of ethno-religious populism, both nationalist narratives and religious ‘othering strategies’ are present in Modi’s speeches. However, while the nationalism-related discourse remained consistent, focusing on the special status of the Muslim-majority populated Jammu and Kashmir, the religious ‘othering’ strategy not only significantly intensified over time but also evolved with the adoption of new techniques. What remained consistent is the use of ‘vote bank politics’ as the main discursive strategy of religious ‘othering’. Nonetheless, while in the 2014 and 2019 electoral campaigns this strategy portrayed Muslims as a threat to national security, in 2024 it is also used to depict Muslims as those who seek to “snatch the rights and property” of the Hindu majority, showing how Modi frames Muslims as increasingly threatening ‘others’.

By looking at the results of each campaign we can see how Modi’s discourse changes based on a given socio-political situation and climate before the election. For example, in the 2014 electoral campaign, Modi’s rhetoric primarily centered on the economy, development, and governance issues. Toned-down Hindutva discourse during this period can be attributed to Modi’s strategic attempt to distance himself from his past, particularly the allegations of complicity in the 2002 Gujarat riots. As a result, the campaign prominently featured the ‘classic’ elements of right-wing populism, such as the construction of antagonism between the ‘corrupt’ (119 references), ‘incompetent’ (44 references) elites and the virtuous, hardworking ‘people’, whose power, usurped by the elites, would be returned by the pro-development BJP (59 references). Additionally, Modi operationalizes the sense of insecurity among people by referring to Pakistani-affiliated terrorist attacks such as the 2008 Mumbai attack and alleged geopolitical threats posed by other

governments, such as China – both said to occur due to an ‘indecisive’ and ‘appeasing’ government. This insecurity narrative also helps Modi to promote anti-Muslim discourse.

Hence, while explicit religious othering did not dominate the 2014 campaign (16 references), the strategy was still present. For example, Modi referred to the ‘Sultanate of Delhi’ as compromising national security to maintain support from its Muslim ‘vote bank’. Although he does not explicitly mention Muslims, the invocation of the Sultanate, as a historical reference to Muslim rule in India, serves as a subtle form of religious othering. Linking the legacy of Muslim rule to contemporary issues of insecurity and terrorism implicitly renders Muslims as those responsible for these threats. Thus, while the language remains indirect, the deliberate choice of this historical allusion in this context clearly indicates the intended target of the discourse.

At the same time, the vision of India as a land of Hindus can already be noticed, with Modi questioning Article 370. However, while in later years the discourse surrounding the Article becomes more aggressive, in 2014 it remains restrained, limited to questioning the ‘benefits’ of the Article and calling for a national discussion about it.

In 2019, after being in power for five years, Modi still manages to campaign on classic populist antagonism, depicting himself and the BJP as anti-elitist figures who genuinely care about ‘people’ and provide various welfare schemes. This illustrates the paradox – but also the power – of right-wing populism: despite being part of the elite himself, Modi continues to capitalize on the image of the ‘common man’ and BJP as the ‘people’s party’. However, what stands out in this campaign is the more securitized discourse in light of the 2019 Balakot attack. While in 2014, terrorist attacks were blamed on ‘appeasing’ Congress, the narrative is reversed both in 2019 and 2024 – Modi is presented as the strong leader who gives decisive counter-attacks and ‘kills terrorists by entering their homes’, a phrase he repeats frequently throughout the campaign (54 references).

In terms of ‘religious othering’, in addition to the narrative of ‘vote bank politics’ as a cause of terrorist attacks, new strategies that reflect the BJP’s post-2014 political agenda are evident. These include references to the Citizenship Amendment Act which was later implemented following the BJP’s victory in 2019 elections. What is particularly noteworthy, and not extensively addressed in the literature, is Modi’s strategy of presenting himself as the savior of Muslim women. Despite the party’s support for traditional family values and gender roles, he adopts a pseudo-emancipatory rhetoric that portrays Islam as an oppressive religion, thereby reinforcing the ‘othering’ of Muslims.

Additionally, the 2019 campaign features more pronounced Hindutva rhetoric, framing India as a Hindu land. Unlike in 2014, there are references to Hindu deities and symbols, which serve to implicitly exclude Muslims by presenting India as a continuation of Hindu civilization. The depiction of Hindus as incapable of terrorism sacralizes Hindu identity as morally superior and constantly under threat, particularly from Muslims. Moreover, Muslims are framed as internal outsiders – ‘infiltrators’ who pose a threat to national identity – a discursive strategy less salient in the 2014 campaign.

The 2024 campaign represents the apex of Modi’s ‘religious othering’ strategy. Unlike in previous elections, ‘religious othering’ occupies a central role in the discourse. Both the inauguration of the Ram Temple – as the symbolic culmination of a 30-year-long legal battle between communities – and the political transformation India underwent between 2019 and 2024, namely the implementation of policies (i.e., the revocation of the Article 370, CAA, NRC that were discussed above) mark the consolidation of Hindu identity at the expense of Muslims.

In this sense, the 2024 campaign is exceptional not only because it perpetuates the vision of India as a Hindu land and portrays Muslims as ‘infiltrators’ or ‘invaders’ threatening the ‘real people’,

but also because it depicts them as a danger to the country's faith. Modi repeatedly warns of an imminent threat to 'our faith' and 'our civilization', using religion as both marker of civilizational identity and as system of faith. Moreover, delegitimizing Muslims as invaders through historical narratives depicts them as perpetual foreigners in India. Invoking history also constructs a distinction between the 'self' and the 'other,' where the 'self', the sacred Hindu identity is constructed as having suffered under this unjust historical oppression of Muslims. Thus, the 2024 campaign transforms religious othering into civilizational populism, where the opposition between 'self' and 'other' transcends national boundaries and adopts a broader civilizational narrative.

However, what distinguishes the Indian case from Western understandings of civilizational populism is that religious othering is not merely about belonging – it is about truly believing in the vision of India as a Hindu land. Here, religious othering is not just an instrumental tool used to mobilize people based on historical grievances, but a genuine belief that India has always been a Hindu civilization. This is particularly evident in the latest campaign, where the inauguration of the Ram Temple is depicted as the culmination of a '500-year-long struggle'. Coupled with the legislative changes discussed above, this rhetoric clearly reflects a broader project to transform India into a Hindu land.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis provided a systematic comparative analysis of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's discourse across three electoral campaigns in 2014, 2019, and 2024. By conducting a comparative content analysis, it explored how Modi's discursive strategy of religious othering evolved over time. In addition, the study examined the frequency of this rhetoric in comparison to other elements of right-wing populism present in Modi's discourse, to assess the extent to which it has intensified across his campaigns. Given the common belief that India is moving away from its secular constitution with the rise of cultural majoritarianism and religious populism, this thesis investigated the role Modi's discourse has played in this transformation.

The findings reveal that when Modi first ran for Prime Minister in 2014, religious othering was one of the least prominent themes of the discourse. At that time, his discourse primarily revolved around the classical populist dichotomy of 'elites versus the people'. However, in the subsequent campaigns of 2019 and 2024, this strategy has both intensified, as well as new strategies emerged. In general, four broader categories can summarize the way Muslims are constructed in Modi's electoral campaigns: (1) a threat to national security, (2) infiltrators who endanger Hindu identity, (3) oppressors of women, and (4) 'barbaric invaders' who destroyed Hindu temples and suppressed Hindu civilization.

It is noteworthy how Modi's discourse became to some extent more aggressive with each electoral cycle, particularly in light of the discriminatory legislations passed against Muslims that is all justified as moving India closer to become '*Hindustan*'. Another key finding is the shift from an ethno-religious populism on a national level to a more civilizational discourse, which is apparent in the 2024 electoral campaign, particularly in discourse about the Ram Temple's inauguration.

Moreover, ‘religious othering’ was not found in relation to Christians residing in India, hence Muslim are found to be the only ones constructed as a ‘threat’ and ‘outsiders’ in Modi’s discourse.

This thesis contributes to the literature by arguing that India under Modi exemplifies a distinct form of ethno-religious and civilizational populism, which differs from contemporary European cases. Particularly, due to historical grievances between Hindu and Muslims, ‘religious othering’ functions not merely as an identity marker that conceptualizes ‘us versus them’, but also as a part of broader project aimed at reshaping national identity and transforming India into ‘*Hindustan*’. Therefore, further research could investigate whether there are other cases that exemplify this distinct form of ethno-religious populism.

However, it is equally important to note that this thesis focused solely on discourse as a speech, whereas discourse might encompass all meaning-making practices. Therefore, future research could conduct a more comprehensive analysis by considering not only speeches but also Modi’s campaign appearances, including examining his attire, campaign posters, and other visual and performative elements, which may further reveal the strategies of religious othering in a more nuanced manner. Additionally, further research could focus on the discourse of other BJP politicians and Hindutva actors, which might reveal more radical ‘religious othering’ strategies.

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## Appendix

Frequency of the sub-codes in each electoral campaign

<b>Bad ‘them’</b>			
<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>Sub-code</b>
<b>119</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>Corrupt elite</b>
<b>18</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>Traitor Congress/Opposition parties</b>
<b>44</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Incompetent Congress</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Authoritarian Congress</b>
<b>Good ‘us’</b>			
<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>Sub-code</b>
<b>59</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>BJP as the ‘people’s party’</b>
<b>24</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>Modi as a common man</b>
<b>44</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Gujarat model</b>
<b>Crisis narratives</b>			
<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>Sub-code</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>Terrorism and Pakistan</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>External threats</b>
<b>-</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>Fight against terrorism</b>
<b>Nationalism</b>			
<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>Sub-code</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>Article 370</b>
<b>Religious ‘othering’</b>			
<b>2014</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>Sub-code</b>
<b>16</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>Vote bank politics</b>
<b>-</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>India as a Hindu land</b>
<b>-</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>CAA</b>
<b>-</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Triple talaq</b>
<b>-</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>Glorifying and protecting Hindu identity</b>
<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Muslims as ‘invaders’</b>