

# The Political Ethics of the Indian Political Right

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*Ajit - 22*

*“The real challenge in recognising, realising, and endorsing place of emotions is how they do not become templates for righteous lawlessness and majoritarianism...Emotive majority today is an undeniable reality in most of the world, but the consequences and the way they can be nudged towards compassionate cohabitation is still an open question.”*

With these words, political theorist Ajay Gudavarthy, in his recent book, *Politics, Ethics and Emotions in 'New India'* attempts to unpack the moral, ethical, and emotive questions that may help one understand the rise of the political right in India.

These questions may also interest us in the current global context of the rise of rightwing conservatism, while studying how people cutting across castes and classes perceive the rightwing construct.

Using a bio-political normative lens, the author puts forward a critical question in the book: “How do we remobilise and occupy ethics and emotions that are not majoritarian, ethics that do not eschew responsibility, and emotions that do not produce a valorised self?”

According to Gudavarthy, this may be particularly relevant in the context of the contemporary political space and the everyday ethics of being in India, when, the Bharatiya Janata Party, under Narendra Modi-Amit Shah, is “justifiably mobilising emotions and striking a chord with a majority, but that is necessarily illiberal in nature and producing ethics that are blatantly majoritarian”.

The book’s thesis is densely layered in three distinct parts (Part I: Politics and Emotions, Part II: Economy and Ethics, and Part III: Ethical Emotions?) and has been written in contribution for the ‘Reshaping India’ book series produced by the Samruddha Bharat Foundation with Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

For those reading Gudavarthy's work for the first time may find more contextual meaning to this text after perceiving this as a sequel to his previous offering, *India After Modi: Populism and the Right* (2018).

### The missing woods

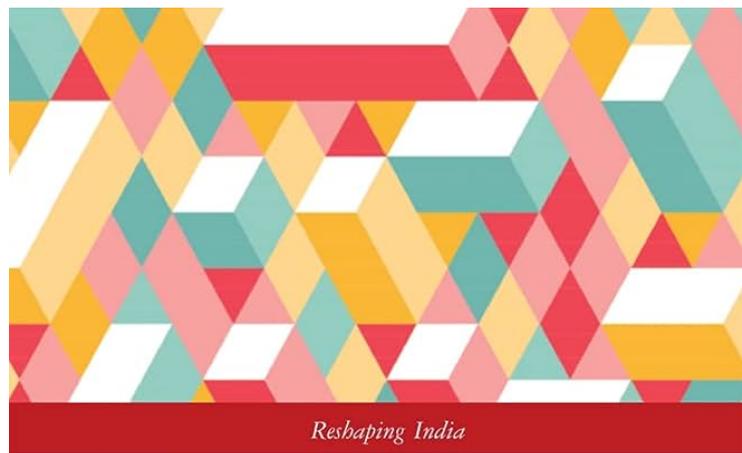
Much of its initial background and interest is situated in studying the rise of the political *right*, i.e. the BJP as part of the Modi-Shah's governmentality and in explaining their regime's complex experiments with the everyday political ethics of being built around the tradecraft of seducing the emotive majority. This can perhaps help one explain a persistent rise in Modi's own popularity, accentuated by the emotive politics of thoughtless belief.

An interesting aspect of viewing the 'emotive' influence of Modi's popularity amongst the larger Indian electorate (especially the Hindi belt) despite the nature of social or economic issues that afflict the same majority, according to Gudavarthy, is established by understanding what the right invests in morality; what a majority works with is everyday ethics.

The quote from Brent Adkins (below) is particularly striking:

"A morality functions according to principle while an ethics functions according to experimentation. A morality presupposes a discontinuity between principle and action, while an ethics presupposes a continuity of action and character. A morality tells one what one ought to do, while an ethics asks what one might do" (Brent Adkins, 2015; p147)

Still, somewhere, in the complex oscillations of a layered thesis that attempts to deal in ethics, morality, and emotions, all at once, there are voids and silences that emerge in Gudavarthy's thesis.



## POLITICS, ETHICS AND EMOTIONS IN 'NEW INDIA'

Ajay Gudavarthy



Politics, Ethics and Emotions in 'New India,' Ajay Gudavarthy, Routledge, 2023.

The everyday ethics of being and what may help explain the average Hindu voter's (as part of the seduced emotive majority) motivational rationality can be studied by viewing the application of Dharma, Dharam, Kama, Karma.

The Brahmanical cloak designed to guide each of these has been deeply politicised by the Modi-Shah-RSS regime which in an effort to establish a Hindu Rashtra considers a persistent effort to influence these for the 'emotive (Hindu) majority'.

Hindutva thus allows one to 'clean India', 'teach minorities a lesson', and establish a masculine muscularity in a hyper-nationalist wave. It is all part of a political project that builds itself on a new morality, the ethics of being for emotions (rage, anger, violence) to be experienced and realised.

What the book's normative axis misses in presenting a robust critique of liberal foundations and principles – that maybe less relevant for the Indian polity or society – is there is more left to be said on what drives a foundational link between the interplay of Morality-Ethics-Emotions (MEE) with the governing dynamics of Dharam, Dharma, Kama and Karma. The latter defines India's socio-political landscape underplayed by a theory of power, faith, cultural propriety, memory and language. All of these, in some way or another, shape the everyday political ethics of being for the majority. The non-emotive here also entwines with the emotive class, while working as templates of self-representation.

The other empirical void that extrapolates from the normative void is the weak link drawn between the actions of the political right in narrativising an alternative 'truth' for the satiated need of the emotive majority.

Such a majority will forget the acquired knowledge of the past for a 'new' truth to be discovered. At the same time, the right has a complex techno-political relationship with the contemporary tools and mechanisms of the current information order and digital technological infrastructure. It is the same structure that the right weaponises on day-to-day basis.

Normative vision and ideas of ethics or morality are mediated through symbolism that can be manipulated through media and information flow. This has been most vital for the Modi-Shah double engine to not just acquire power, but also consolidate it over the last decade.

### **Building the thesis forward**

In my book *Strongmen Saviours...* with Abhinav Padmanabhan, our own comparative analysis of the recent wave of rightwing populist movements across the world was explained through a distinct pattern exhibiting features that have been unique to the nature of right-wing movements (as against left-wing movements of the past).

The purpose then was to provide a comparative socio-political, economic explanation of the rise of populist beliefs and anti-political elite sentiment that has not captured much of the Western and non-Western sphere.

The pyramid constructed below, drawn-built on our book's research may offer some insights:



The conceptual pyramid attempts to unpack features of right-wing populism, operating under the guise-envelope of 'ideological populism' (ideologically aligned populist movements), which has a distinct meaning (see a more detailed explainer [here](#)).

In simple terms, *ideological populism* refers to the unchecked-unabated rise of an ideology, the marginalization of its moderate factions, involving the development of a cult-personality that infuses shades of populism into it. Normatively, this can be ideologically aligned towards the 'political left' or the 'political right'. The distinct characteristics of rightwing populism at least the way we have observed in countries such as India, Turkey, Russia, and Brazil did see certain common features, across different times and spaces. I explained a few of these factors/features from the pyramid [here](#).

Three factors contribute to the right's authoritative rise to majoritarian power. They are:

### **Failure of Neoliberalism (supply-side economics of the 90s)**

The origins of each of these movements are in the economic discontents of neoliberalism or the nature of supply-side economics (externally influenced by the West/Washington Consensus style reform packages) pursued in the 1990s. Studies from scholars like [Sides et al. \(2018\)](#), [Norris & Inglehart \(2019\)](#), and [Margalit \(2019\)](#) also explain this.

There is a wave of rise in religious conservatism or religious orthodoxy (from Hindutva to Orthodox Islam to Evangelical Catholicism) that aided the rise of each of the leaders who either belonged to political parties or to orthodox-religious based organisations which ensured an undercurrent of religious conservatism. This made more people open to acknowledging, practicing or promoting 'extreme' beliefs. I explain more about this phenomenon (as seen in India, Turkey, Russia, and Brazil) in a lecture [given here](#).

The trigger factor which led to the mass-protest vote in favour of each strongman figure from Modi to Bolsonaro, was often related to either a series of big public corruption episodes or reported scandal(s) in the home country's domestic political environment, which gave the opportunity for mass support in favour of an alternative imagination of power. A leader, someone outside the status quo ruling political elite, came to power, and enjoyed mass popularity.

From India to Brazil, each of the countries we discuss in the book saw episodes of public corruption via scandals or were operating in a widely perceived environment of corruption that spurred the choice of voting for an alternative. This was also seen with the protest vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election.

The weaponisation of social media in a new tech-enabled information order made it possible for rightwing populists to continue feeding an alternative, post-truth rhetorical narrative of 'us versus them', pivoted on the axis of immigration. Surveillance capitalism made this possible too under a new nexus of private capital-state relationship which supported strongmen figures in power through social media and digitised surveillance tools.

### **Focus on privatisation**

The nature of fiscal policy brought by each of the right-wing populist strongman figures in recent years has been drastically varied when compared to earlier regimes of populist movements (as seen in Latin America). Earlier strongman leaderships were influenced by a theory of economic and political change belonging to pro-welfare, left-leaning policies, which in some instances like Venezuela made governments fiscally indebted.

The latest variant of rightwing populism has seen a promotion of privatisation and reorientation of previous state-private capital elite relationships. This has been pursued with gradual disinvestment of public assets and government ownership of resources, including a de-funding of social programmes targeted for job creation, human capital development-healthcare and education. This is widely seen in the fiscal choices made by most strongman figures like Modi.

Despite this, the strongmen continue to strike a chord with extremely low-income voters in some of the lesser developed states and provinces thanks to the political use of targeted beneficiary-based welfare schemes.

It must however be observed that none of this so-called welfare spending is aimed at the upward mobility of the low-income beneficiary.

## On contestations within: Hyper-globalism and ideological populism

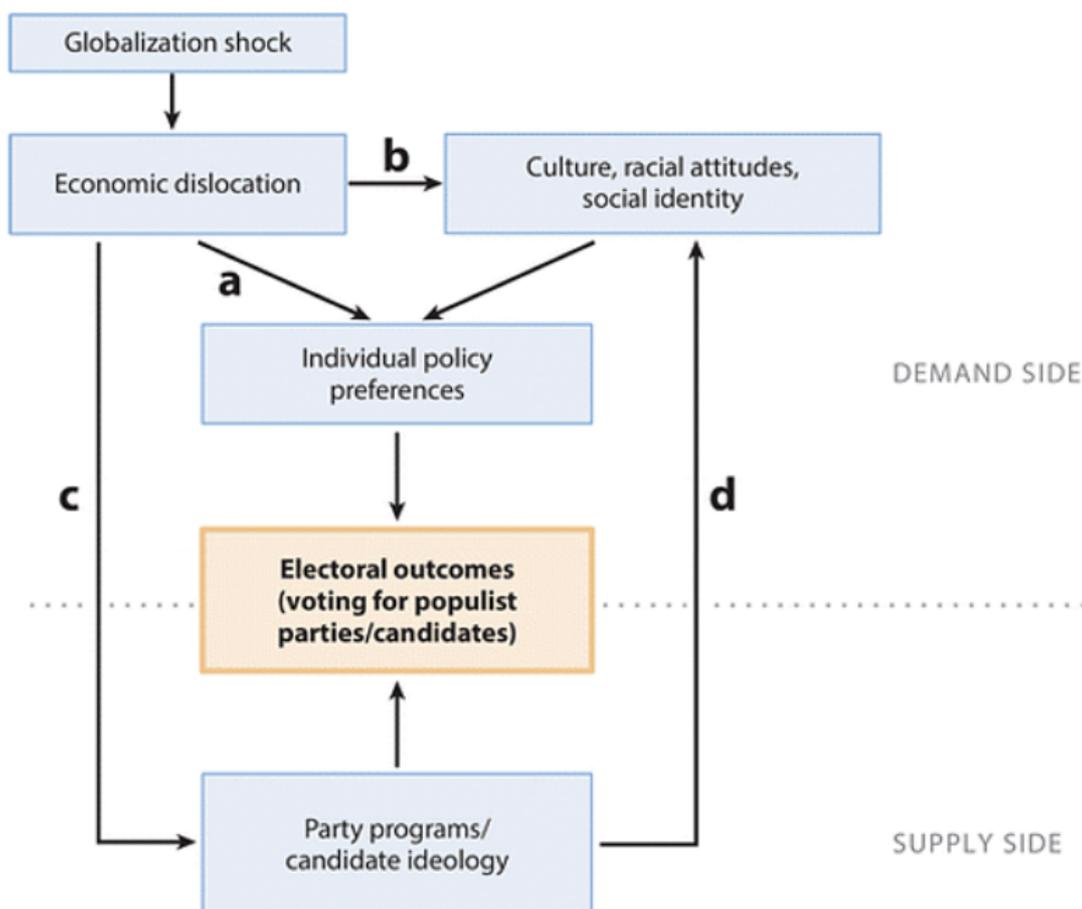
Dani Rodrik's recent work (2021; 2023) offers useful insights on at least addressing one of these 'contested' conceptual questions: Why did globalisation of the post-1990s variant fuel a certain wave of populism, one that spread far across the west and the east?

According to Rodrik, "It is important to understand what are the mechanisms through which globalisation fuels populism. Answering this question requires a fully fleshed-out model of political economy."

"Second, globalisation is not just one thing. We can distinguish between international trade, international finance, and international labour flows, specifically. How does each one of these facets of globalisation work its way through the political system?"

"Third, globalisation is clearly not the only economic shock that creates redistributive effects or economic anxiety – and it may not even be the most important one. Why does globalisation appear to have an outsized effect on politics compared to, say, technological change or regular business cycles?"

These aspects are studied more empirically by Rodrik in the framework created below:



First, according to Rodrik's analytical framework above, and most directly, "economic dislocation can determine voters' preferences for policies and leaders (arrow a). Voters in a region where employment prospects have been adversely affected by a rise in imports may choose to cast their vote for a politician who advocates protectionism and a tougher line against foreign exporters.

"Second, economic dislocation may shape voters' preferences indirectly through the effect it has on identity or the salience of certain cultural values (arrow b). Concretely, economic shocks can heighten feelings of insecurity, inducing voters to make sharper distinctions between insiders ("us") and ethnic, religious, or racial outsiders ("them").

"They can lead voters to yearn for an earlier era of prosperity and stability, increasing the political salience of traditional cultural values and hierarchies. And to the extent that they generate wider economic and social gaps within a nation, economic shocks may reinforce more local, less encompassing identities. To the extent that such effects operate, political preferences that appear to be driven by cultural values do in fact have deeper economic roots."

We explored some of these links between the discontents of neoliberal economics and populism in the context of India, Turkey, Brazil, and Russia, however, there were other factors complementing this and Rodrik's framework shared above.

Two additional causal factors are instances of large-scale public corruption (or an environment of an ostensibly corrupt political elite), and a rise in religious conservatism contributed to the rise of rightwing populist movements that subsequently brought leaders like Modi, Bolsonaro, and Putin, to power.

There is a critical need to put these explanations in perspective and context while building upon what Gudavarthy's frame of reasoning brings in light. This must be done by adopting a more neo-subaltern approach that is grounded in interpreting a random person's preference for the political right. One must also see how the right operates in influencing one's everyday ethics distinctively and assertively, while thriving on the anxieties, fears, and insecurities of the emotive majority.

A lot more needs to be done in also understanding how the moral-ethical core of an average Hindu voter subscribing to the populist belief remains influenced by the applied role of Dharam, Dharma, Kama and Karma in everyday life.

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