

Civilisational Developmentalism: Theorising the Modi Era as a Phase of Delivery, Digital Statecraft and Cultural Self-Assertion in India

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Abstract

More than ten years after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, scholars still use many different names for the “Modi era”. This article surveys the main frameworks: populism; Hindu nationalism and “ethnic democracy”; democratic backsliding and electoral autocracy; personalisation of power; new developmental-state accounts; the digital or “platform state”; and comparative illiberalism. It also reviews the main counter-arguments, including Ashutosh Varshney’s view that elections remain real and the Government of India’s rejection of international democracy indices. On this basis, the article makes a definite proposal. It argues that the period since 2014 is best named an era of civilisational developmentalism. In this model, a dominant party with very wide popular support uses a more capable, digitally connected state to deliver welfare and growth, and at the same time claims a larger public place for India’s own civilisational identity. Each existing framework captures one part of the model, but none explains how the parts fit together. The article also states four conditions that would show the model to be wrong. It does not say that the era is free of problems. Concerns about press freedom, minority rights, jobs and inequality are treated as tests of the model and not as side issues. The article concludes that civilisational developmentalism is the most complete and a constructive description of the Modi era so far, and that its success depends on delivery, fair competition and inclusion of all citizens.

Keywords: Modi era; civilisational developmentalism; populism; Hindu nationalism; ethnic democracy; democratic backsliding; developmental state; digital public infrastructure; dominant-party system

1. Introduction: The Problem of Naming an Era

To call a period of Indian political history “the Modi era” is already to make a theoretical claim, and many scholars dispute it. The claim says that the years since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in May 2014 hold together well enough, and differ enough from what came before, to be studied as one unit built around one leader. These years now cover three terms and more than a decade. Many scholars accept this idea in some form, but they disagree sharply about the main logic of the era.

Some scholars see populism, in which “the people” stand against a corrupt elite. Some see the rise of Hindu nationalism and the remaking of India into what Jaffrelot (2021) calls an “ethnic democracy”. Some see democratic backsliding towards electoral autocracy. Some focus on the personalisation of executive power. Some see a new, more state-led model of development wrapped in the language of liberalisation. Others point to a “platform state” built on digital systems. A further group rejects the idea of a Modi-

centred era altogether. These scholars say that long-term trends in Indian democracy, political economy and majoritarian politics explain more, and that such trends began before 2014 and will last beyond it. This article does two things. First, it surveys the main frameworks in the literature on Indian and comparative politics, reads them alongside their critics, and notes how the Indian government itself has contested some of them. Second, it uses this survey to propose a definite name and theory for the period: civilisational developmentalism (Section 11). This is a judgement and not only a neutral summary. The article therefore states the evidence on which it rests, the conditions under which it would be wrong, and the rival readings. Any theory of an ongoing era is provisional in a way that a theory of a closed period is not. The risks of getting the periodisation wrong are also higher. One risk is to flatten real institutional change. The opposite risk is to read continuity as a break.

The article is organised by theme. Sections 2 to 8 each take up one framework: populism, Hindu nationalism and ethnic democracy, democratic backsliding and electoral autocracy, personalisation of power, developmental-state and political-economy accounts, the platform or digital state, and comparative illiberalism. Each section explains the central claims, names the leading scholars, and gives the main objections, including the Government of India's own public response where this is relevant. Section 9 looks at structural accounts that reject leader-centred theory. Section 10 compares the frameworks and asks where they agree and where they cannot both be true. Section 11 proposes the theory, and Section 12 concludes. Table 1 summarises the seven frameworks and Table 2 summarises the proposed model.

2. Populism and the “Thin Ideology” Debate

The most widely used general framework for Modi's political style is populism. In this framework, populism is understood in the minimal or “thin ideology” sense of Mudde (2004). It is a way of speaking that divides society into “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and says that politics should express the general will of the people. McDonnell and Cabrera (2019) apply this idea to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Modi, and argue that scholars of comparative politics should pay attention to the Indian case. Studies of this kind point to several features of Modi's style. He presents himself as a chaiwala (tea-seller) and an outsider to the dynastic political circle of Delhi. He speaks directly to the public through radio (Mann Ki Baat) and social media. He describes criticism from the opposition as the work of an entrenched, Westernised elite that stands against the will of ordinary Indians. Taken together, these features make a discourse that is similar to right-wing populism in Europe and the Americas (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2019).

A second line of work speaks of “civilisational populism” and compares Modi with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin (Chekirova, 2022; Saleem et al., 2022). It argues that Indian populism is mainly civilisational and not only economic or anti-elite. The “people” in this account are not just ordinary citizens against a corrupt establishment. They are the Hindu civilisational nation, often called Bharat rather than India. This nation is set against religious minorities who are seen as not fully assimilated, and against external “others” drawn from colonial or Mughal history. On this view, Hindu nationalism is not a separate framework from populism. It is the content that fills the “thin” populist form in India.

Critics of the populism frame often accept that it describes Modi's style well. But they warn that it fits too many cases. The same frame is used for Modi, Erdoğan, Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán and many others. This may hide what is specially Indian about the BJP's project. One such feature is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organisation more than a hundred years old that is much older than the global populist wave of the 2010s. Another is a social base marked by caste and religion, which is quite

unlike the mainly class-based coalitions of European right-wing parties. For these critics, treating Modi as just the Indian case of a general populist type may hide more than it shows. They see the Hindu nationalism and ethnic democracy framework of the next section as a rival, India-specific alternative and not just an extension of populism theory.

3. Hindu Nationalism and the “Ethnic Democracy” Framework

The most influential single theory of the Modi era in India-focused scholarship is Christophe Jaffrelot’s (2021) book *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Jaffrelot borrows the idea of “ethnic democracy” from the Israeli sociologist Sammy Smooha (1997). In an ethnic democracy, elections stay truly competitive and most formal democratic institutions continue to work. But full citizenship in practice is built around membership of a dominant ethnic or religious group. In Jaffrelot’s argument, that group is Hindu, and more exactly upper-caste Hindu.

On this account, the Modi era is not defined by charismatic populism as such, nor by a complete authoritarian takeover. It is defined by a more specific and, Jaffrelot argues, longer-lasting change in the terms of Indian citizenship. Muslims and other religious minorities remain equal before the law and keep the right to vote. But they face a growing set of informal and increasingly formal disadvantages. These range from vigilante violence over cattle slaughter and interfaith relationships to the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, which gave a fast track to citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries. For Jaffrelot and scholars close to him, these steps add up to a move in practice, though not yet in law, towards a Hindu *Rashtra* (Hindu nation-state).

This framework draws on a much older body of scholarship on *Hindutva* (“Hindu-ness”) as a political ideology that is different from Hinduism as a religion. It traces the organisational roots to the RSS, founded in 1925, and the ideological roots to V. D. Savarkar’s tract *Hindutva* (Savarkar, 1923/1969). It sees the electoral dominance of the BJP since 2014 as the high point, and not the start, of a project of civilisational and demographic self-assertion that has lasted for decades. Related work by Chacko (2023) on “disciplining India” takes this argument into political economy. It says that paternalistic welfare politics, continued economic liberalisation and *Hindutva* civilisationalism work together as complementary tools of rule.

The ethnic democracy framework has been influential, but it has not gone unchallenged. Some scholars say that it understates how competitive Indian elections still are. India also has a large opposition coalition that is plural in religion and language, and that was able to reduce the BJP’s majority in the 2024 general election and to win in some states. Section 4 returns to this point through Varshney’s distinction between democratic erosion and authoritarian capture. Other critics note that “ethnic democracy” was first developed for Israel and its Arab citizens. It may assume a minority that is concentrated in one territory and fixed in size. This fits India imperfectly, because India’s Muslim population is larger and more spread out. It was about 14 per cent of the population in the 2011 Census, the latest full census (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). So the framework may apply differently across Indian states and regions and may not describe one uniform national condition.

4. Democratic Backsliding, Electoral Autocracy and Their Critics

A third framework is more general and comparative. It places the Modi era within the wide literature on democratic backsliding. Backsliding means the slow and often legal weakening of democratic institutions

and norms by leaders who keep winning elections (Bermeo, 2016). This is different from the sudden, unconstitutional seizure of power seen in classic coups.

The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) project at the University of Gothenburg publishes some of the most cited reports on this subject. In its data, India has been classed as an electoral autocracy since 2017, and the report describes India's autocratisation as a slow but systematic dismantling of democratic institutions (Nord et al., 2026, p. 23). The 2026 report names India among the most populous electoral autocracies in the world (Nord et al., 2026). News reports on the 2026 index place India at 105th of 179 countries on the Liberal Democracy Index and 106th on the Electoral Democracy Index (Madhyamam Web Desk, 2026; Outlook News Desk, 2026). In 2025, India stood at 100th of 179 on the Liberal Democracy Index (The Wire Analysis, 2025).

The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) reaches a similar but somewhat milder view. Its 2026 country report gives India a Political Transformation score of 6.10 out of 10, which puts it 49th among 137 countries (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). The report speaks of continued democratic backsliding. It says that the independence of the judiciary from the executive has been seriously questioned and that press freedom is increasingly limited, with India ranked 161st of 180 countries in 2023 and 159th in 2024 on the Reporters Without Borders index. At the same time, the report says that elections are mostly free and fair, and it notes that the BJP lost its outright majority in 2024 and won 240 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). Figure 1 shows selected milestones in this story.

This framework has met two kinds of criticism. One is empirical and the other is about method. The empirical criticism is linked most closely with Ashutosh Varshney of Brown University. He accepts much of the evidence that the backsliding literature gives, such as restrictions on the press, civil society and religious minorities. But he rejects the conclusion that India's elections themselves have become unfree or unfair. Varshney separates democratic erosion, which is found in civil liberties, judicial independence and freedom of expression, from authoritarian capture of the electoral process itself. He points to the loss of power by the BJP in several state elections and its smaller majority in 2024 as signs that elections still produce real, unmanipulated results, even while other parts of democracy weaken (Kempf, 2022; Murari, 2026). On this view, the label "electoral autocracy" may overstate how severe, and above all how permanent, India's democratic condition is, because it puts a mixed record under one alarming name.

The method-based criticism comes most strongly from the Government of India itself. It has repeatedly and publicly rejected the V-Dem and Freedom House indices as biased. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar called the exercise an act of international hypocrisy (Scroll Staff, 2021). In 2024, the government was reported to be preparing its own democracy index (Dutta, 2024). Most independent commentators read this as a direct response to the downgrades. The government defends it as a correction to Western standards that it sees as narrow and unsuited to a large and diverse non-Western democracy. Independent ranking experts, for their part, have said that the downgrade of India is fair, while also saying that the repeated public dismissal of the indices by Indian officials is not helpful (Article 14, n.d.). The dispute over the validity of the indices is itself part of the larger picture. Argument over the right standards for judging democratic quality often appears in backsliding cases around the world and is not special to India.

Figure 1
Selected Milestones in the Debate on India's Democratic Classification, 2014–2026



Note. LDI = Liberal Democracy Index; EDI = Electoral Democracy Index. The classification is V-Dem's own and is publicly contested by the Government of India (see Section 4). Based on Nord et al. (2026), Scroll Staff (2021), Dutta (2024), Bertelsmann Stiftung (2026), Madhyamam Web Desk (2026) and Outlook News Desk (2026).

5. Personalism and the Restructuring of Executive Power

A fourth framework looks less at ideology (as in populism and Hindu nationalism) or at regime type (as in electoral autocracy). It looks instead at the inner structure of executive and party power. Its argument is that what is special about the Modi era lies largely in the gathering of decision-making power in the Prime Minister's Office and in Modi himself. This has come at the cost of cabinet government, of the BJP's own older habit of shared leadership, and of the professional independence of the civil service. Ruparelia (2015) examines the government's own slogan, "Minimum Government, Maximum Governance". He argues that the promise of a leaner, less interfering state has in practice meant almost the opposite. In his view, the government has placed power in a more personal and technocratic executive and has limited political transparency, parliamentary government and social dissent. At the same time, it has liberalised in some areas, such as industrial licensing and rules on foreign investment. It has weakened labour protections, environmental review and the safeguards for consent in land acquisition. And while it has been inventive in cash transfers and insurance, it has narrowed the earlier rights-based welfare laws. Comparative work on the personalisation of parties puts this development next to the earlier personalisation of the Indian National Congress around Indira Gandhi in the 1970s, while also separating the two. Leake and Chhibber (2024) describe the personalisation of both parties as temporary and partial. Journalistic and essay-style writing goes further. Some writers call the present situation a "cult" of the leader, in which loyalty to Modi as a person has replaced accountability to the party, the cabinet or Parliament (Guha, 2022). Scholars who use this framework mostly see it as compatible with the populism and ethnic democracy frameworks and not as their rival. Personalisation describes how the government

works. Populism and Hindu nationalism describe its ideas and its electoral appeal. These scholars also warn that personalisation alone is not enough as an explanation. It may hide the deeper institutional and ideological structures, above all the RSS network, that would probably outlast any one leader. Section 9 develops this point.

6. The Developmental State Revisited: New Developmentalism and Oligarchic Capitalism

A fifth group of studies looks at the Modi era through political economy and the comparative literature on developmental states. The question here is whether the period continues or breaks from the state-led model of development described in earlier work on India by Kohli (2006) and others.

Chatterjee (2020) challenges the common view that the Gujarat model (2001–14) and its later national version were simply neoliberal or deregulatory. She argues that Gujarat under Modi as Chief Minister, and later India under Modi as Prime Minister, show a hybrid “new developmentalist” model. This model combines the language of liberalisation with wide and direct state action. The state builds infrastructure, promotes chosen industries and helps new sectors to be born. It also acts to correct market failures left behind by earlier liberalisation. State-owned enterprises and direct allocation of state capital remain important, even though policy statements stress ease of doing business and private enterprise. According to Chatterjee, such a model tends over time towards bias in favour of the party in power, wrong allocation of resources and debt.

A related but more critical line of work studies what Chatterjee (2023) calls India’s oligarchic state capitalism. It argues that the new developmentalist state has in practice concentrated economic opportunity in a small number of politically connected business groups. Infrastructure contracts, spectrum allocation and licences in strategic sectors, it says, benefit mainly firms with close links to the ruling party. Critics call this crony capitalism. Defenders of the developmental-state view are more likely to call it the normal, if imperfect, working of state-led industrial policy in a large economy with scarce capital that is going through rapid structural change. Most scholars in this framework agree that the political economy of the Modi era cannot be captured by a simple choice between liberalisation and statism, even if they disagree on how to judge the resulting mix.

7. The Digital or “Platform State”: A New Analytical Frame

A sixth framework is fairly recent and is still taking shape. It explains the Modi era through digital governance and infrastructure, and not through ideology, regime type or developmental political economy. It takes as its subject the rapid building, since 2009 and especially after 2014, of a national system of digital identity and payments. This includes the biometric identity system Aadhaar, the “JAM” trinity of Jan Dhan bank accounts, Aadhaar and Mobile connectivity, and the wider “India Stack” of connected digital public infrastructure, such as UPI payments and DigiLocker document storage. The question is what kind of state is being built when welfare delivery, identity checks and, more and more, financial and commercial transactions run through a common digital system that is largely designed and controlled by the central government.

Studies of this kind, including the work of Mishra et al. (2023) on whether Aadhaar is a platform or an infrastructure, treat the system as a distinct mode of statecraft. It is sometimes called digital or platform governance. It does not fit neatly with the other frameworks in this article. It can be read as a tool of inclusion, because it extends access to finance and welfare to citizens who had no documents before. It can also be read as a tool of surveillance and exclusion, because it allows close monitoring of individuals

and, critics argue, can lead to welfare being denied when authentication fails, with the poorest and most marginal claimants affected most.

Mahanta (2026) gives this frame its most developed political-theory statement. He argues that India's mass biometric identity system, its frequent internet shutdowns and the export of its digital public infrastructure to partner governments are not contradictions. They are three faces of one political form, the platform state, in which sovereignty is exercised through the design and control of digital infrastructure as much as through law or force. He proposes two concepts to extend the older vocabulary of citizenship, sovereignty and the public sphere. "Infrastructural citizenship" is a further register of citizenship, in which access to other rights increasingly depends on enrolment in the digital infrastructure. "Exportable sovereignty" describes the spread of the Indian model to other states. He also stresses that the platform state is contested and not monolithic, because the judiciary has repeatedly checked executive digital power. For this reason, he says, it differs both from the private-platform model of the United States and from the state-surveillance model of China (Mahanta, 2026).

Because this framework is newer and less settled than the others, its link with the populism, ethnic democracy and backsliding frameworks is still debated. Some scholars see platform governance as a technical base that is in principle neutral in ideology and could be inherited and run by any later government. Others argue that gathering personal data and transaction records in institutions answerable to the central executive is itself a form of concentration of power. In their view, it connects with the personalisation discussed in Section 5 and may strengthen it, whichever party controls the centre. Mahanta (2026) offers one way to hold both readings together, by describing the platform state as a contested equilibrium between infrastructural executive power and judicial and civic counter-power. This article does not choose between these readings. It notes the platform-state frame as a distinct and still-developing line of theory. Its full meaning for Indian democracy may not be clear until the system has been tested by a change of ruling party at the centre.

8. Comparative Illiberalism: India in Global Perspective

A seventh framework places the Modi era neither in an India-specific setting nor in general populism. It places it within an openly comparative frame beside other present-day cases. Scholars call these cases by different names, such as illiberal democracy, competitive authoritarianism or "antidemocratic populism in power". The most common comparisons are Viktor Orbán's Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey, and in some studies Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel and Donald Trump's United States.

A good example is the study by Rogenhofer and Panievsky (2020), which compares Erdoğan's Turkey, Modi's India and Netanyahu's Israel. They argue that each case combines a leader with electoral legitimacy with a long campaign against independent courts, media and civil-society groups, and with the promotion of a majoritarian national or religious identity as the proper basis of citizenship. They also warn that the cases differ in important ways. The methods differ: Hungary and Turkey used constitutional amendment, while India has used a lighter mix of laws, administrative pressure and informal intimidation, and its constitutional text has been changed far less. The starting conditions differ as well. India's federal structure and its very large and socially varied electorate place limits on centralisation that Hungary, or even Turkey, did not face to the same degree.

Supporters of this frame say that its main value is diagnostic. By placing the Modi era within a recognisable global pattern of illiberal politics in the early twenty-first century, it lets scholars test, with care, ideas about causes and likely paths that were developed in other cases. Possible causes include

economic insecurity, status anxiety among dominant social groups and the breakdown of traditional media gatekeeping. Critics reply that this frame, like the general populism frame of Section 2, may give too little weight to what is specific to India in its institutions and history. India has a working multi-party federal system with twenty-eight states, in which hundreds of millions of voters make real electoral choices at the state level, even where competition at the national level has narrowed. This again meets Varshney's distinction between erosion and capture from Section 4.

9. Structural Accounts: Beyond Modi and the Populist Lens

A final and important body of scholarship rejects leader-centred theory more deeply. It argues that to frame India's political path mainly around Modi's personal style, charisma or ideology is a mistake, whether the intention is to praise or to criticise. Such a framing may overstate his personal causal role. It may also suggest, more quietly, that a change of leader or ruling party would by itself reverse the underlying trends.

Chidambaram (2021) looks "beyond Modi and the populist lens" and explains India's path towards autocratisation through longer-term structural trends. One is the gradual weakening, over several decades and under several governing parties, of the protection that the bureaucracy and the judiciary enjoyed from political pressure in the Nehruvian period. Another is the long organisational growth of the RSS and its family of civil-society, educational and labour organisations, known as the Sangh Parivar, since 1925. This gives Hindu nationalist politics an institutional base that would continue whatever the electoral fortunes of any one leader. A third is a set of features of the electoral system and the media market. First-past-the-post voting can turn a plurality of votes into a comfortable majority in Parliament, and the ownership of television and digital media is increasingly concentrated. These features create lasting incentives for majoritarian mobilisation, whichever party or leader is in power.

This structural view does not so much refute the other frameworks as reduce their causal weight. It suggests that populist style, ethnic-democratic content, backsliding, personalised executive power, developmental political economy and platform-state architecture may all describe the period since 2014. But they are better seen as the present form of longer-running trends in Indian political development, and not as a break caused mainly by Modi as a person. This matters for how the "Modi era" should be periodised. If the structural account is largely right, the final theoretical and historical limits of the era may be much less tidy than the years of Modi's time in office. There would be important continuities both before 2014 and after the end of his premiership.

10. Shared Ground and Real Disagreement

Read together, the frameworks in Sections 2 to 9 share more empirical ground than their different vocabularies suggest. Nearly all of them deal, in one way or another, with the same developments. These are the continued electoral dominance of the BJP since 2014; the shrinking space for religious minorities, press freedom and civil society, which several independent indices record; the gathering of policy power in the Prime Minister's Office; continued headline economic growth, whose measurement is contested, alongside persistent and, in some readings, growing economic inequality; and the rapid building of digital infrastructure by the state.

The frameworks differ less over these facts than over three other things. The first is how much causal weight each factor should get. The second is the path they imply. Can the process be reversed through ordinary electoral politics, as Varshney's distinction between erosion and capture implies? Or is it a deeper

and harder-to-reverse change, as the ethnic democracy and some backsliding accounts suggest? The third is the main unit of analysis, which may be the leader's style, the content of ideology, the classification of the regime, institutional structure, political economy, technology or long-term structural trends.

It is important to say clearly that these frameworks are mostly not offered by their supporters as rivals that exclude one another. A position that combines several of them is possible. For example, civilisational populist rhetoric (Section 2) may work through a personalised executive (Section 5) that governs through both a renewed developmental political economy (Section 6) and a new digital infrastructure (Section 7). The result may be coded by independent indices as democratic backsliding (Section 4), while the system still faces real, though narrowing, electoral limits (Kempf, 2022; Murari, 2026). Such a position hangs together well and fits a large share of the literature surveyed here.

What divides scholars more sharply is the question of values and prediction. One view is that the net result of these developments is a legitimate, electorally approved majoritarian correction to the overreach of an earlier secular elite. This is broadly the view of sympathetic commentators and of the Indian government's public position. The other view is that the result is a more troubling erosion of India's post-independence constitutional settlement. This is the view reached by most of the international literature on comparative democracy that this article has reviewed. The next section argues that one name can hold the shared ground together without hiding this disagreement.

Table 1
Seven Frameworks for Theorising the Modi Era

Framework	Main claim	Key scholars	Main criticism
Populism	A “thin” idea that sets “the people” against a corrupt elite; in its civilisational form, “the people” means the Hindu nation	Mudde (2004); McDonnell & Cabrera (2019); Chekirova (2022)	Fits many countries, so it may hide Indian features such as the RSS and the caste and religion base
Hindu nationalism and “ethnic democracy”	Citizens are equal on paper, but upper-caste Hindu identity gets real privilege	Jaffrelot (2021), using Smootha (1997)	May understate how competitive elections remain; the concept was built for Israel, a different setting
Democratic backsliding and electoral autocracy	Slow, often legal weakening of democratic norms by a leader who keeps winning elections	Nord et al. (2026); Bertelsmann Stiftung (2026)	Varshney: confuses erosion of freedoms with capture of elections; Government of India rejects index methods

Personalism	Power gathers in the Prime Minister's Office and in Modi himself, at the cost of cabinet and party	Ruparelia (2015); Leake & Chhibber (2024)	May overstate one person's role against lasting structures such as the RSS
Developmental state and political economy	A mix of market language and strong state action; critics see oligarchic or crony capture	Chatterjee (2020, 2023); Kohli (2006)	Debate over whether concentrated opportunity is crony capture or normal industrial policy
Platform or digital state	Welfare, identity and payments run through common state-built digital systems (Aadhaar, JAM, India Stack)	Mahanta (2026); Mishra et al. (2023)	Newest and least settled; unclear whether a neutral base or a centralising design
Comparative illiberalism	India is one case in a global pattern with Hungary, Turkey and Israel	Rogenhofer & Panievsky (2020)	May underweight India's federal structure and state-level competition

Note. This table summarises Sections 2 to 8. A structural view (Section 9; Chidambaram, 2021) treats all seven as results of long-term trends and not of a break specific to Modi.

11. Civilisational Developmentalism: A Proposed Name and Theory of the Era

This article proposes that the period since 2014 is best named an era of civilisational developmentalism. The term has two parts. “Developmentalism” means that the central government gives first priority to state-led delivery: welfare transfers, infrastructure and digital systems that reach citizens directly. “Civilisational” means that this delivery comes together with a public claim that India's own cultural and historical identity should have a larger place in national life. The two parts support each other. Delivery gives the project popular legitimacy, and the civilisational message gives it meaning and a sense of belonging. Voters are asked to support both a better life and a stronger national self-image.

The theory has four pillars, and each pillar comes from one or more of the frameworks surveyed above. Table 2 sets them out. The first pillar is mass electoral legitimacy. In a 2023 survey, 79 per cent of Indians said they had a favourable view of Modi (Huang et al., 2023). Vaishnav and Hinton (2019) describe the BJP's win of 303 seats in 2019, with 353 for its alliance, as the start of a new, fourth party system, and they note that the share of poor voters backing the party rose from 24 to 36 per cent in five years. This dominance has limits that keep it democratic: in 2024 the BJP won 240 of 543 seats and lost its outright majority (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026).

The second pillar is the delivery state. An International Monetary Fund study reports that 462.5 million bank accounts were opened under the 2014 inclusion drive by August 2022, that the Unified Payments Interface carried 68 per cent of payment transactions by volume, and that about 87 per cent of poor households received at least one benefit in the first months of the pandemic. It also reports a Government of India estimate that about 1.1 per cent of GDP in expenditure was saved up to March 2021 through the digital systems and other governance reforms (Alonso et al., 2023). On poverty, a Government of India factsheet reports World Bank estimates that extreme poverty, at the 2.15 dollar line, fell from 16.2 per cent in 2011–12 to 2.3 per cent in 2022–23 (Press Information Bureau, 2025). This pillar joins the developmental-state accounts (Chatterjee, 2020, 2023), the paternalistic welfare politics described by

Chacko (2023) and the platform-state literature (Mahanta, 2026; Mishra et al., 2023), and it asks that they be read as one system of delivery.

The third pillar is civilisational self-assertion. Here the article keeps both readings visible. Jaffrelot (2021) reads the same facts as the rise of an ethnic democracy. Chekirova (2022) and Saleem et al. (2022) call it civilisational populism. Supporters describe the same development as a long-delayed return of cultural confidence after colonial rule. The article does not say that either reading is wrong. It says that the claim becomes constructive when it widens the sense of national belonging, and it becomes a problem only if it narrows equal citizenship in law or in daily life. This is the most important test of the theory.

The fourth pillar is executive-centred governance inside real electoral competition. Ruparelia (2015) and Leake and Chhibber (2024) show how decision-making has gathered in the Prime Minister's Office. Varshney's distinction between erosion and capture, and the BTI finding that elections are mostly free and fair, show that voters still make real choices (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026; Kempf, 2022; Murari, 2026). The theory treats a strong executive and open elections as present together, and treats the balance between them as something to be watched and not as settled.

There are good reasons to prefer this name to the alternatives. Populism describes a style, but it does not say what the government delivers or what it believes. Ethnic democracy captures one pillar and uses a label that is itself contested. Electoral autocracy is a classification of the regime. Its force is weakened by the 2024 result and by the evidence that elections remain open, and it says nothing about delivery. Personalism describes a method of rule, not its purpose. The platform state describes an instrument. Comparative illiberalism places India in a global group but misses what is specific to its delivery state and its federal competition. Civilisational developmentalism is wider, because it can hold all of these findings together. It is also testable, because each pillar has a condition that would show it wrong.

The theory also gives a periodisation. The first phase, from 2014 to 2019, was one of consolidation: a new party system took shape and the delivery state began to be built. The second phase, from 2019 to 2024, was one of deepening: digital delivery spread, and the civilisational claim moved from rhetoric into policy. The third phase began in 2024. The BJP remained the largest party but needed allies to govern, and so the model now has to show that it can work under coalition conditions (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). On this view, the era will end when one of the four pillars fails, and not only when the Prime Minister leaves office. The structural account of Chidambaram (2021) suggests that some pillars may last beyond any one leader.

The article does not hide the evidence that critics use. India's rank on the Reporters Without Borders index was 161st in 2023 and 159th in 2024, and the BTI report says that judicial independence has been questioned (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). V-Dem classes India as an electoral autocracy (Nord et al., 2026). Vaishnav and Hinton (2019) describe growth in Modi's first term as solid but not remarkable. Frequent internet shutdowns, which the platform-state literature records (Mahanta, 2026), are a further test of the fourth pillar. Jobs, inequality and digital exclusion remain open problems, and the poverty figures above come from a government summary and from estimates that are still being revised. The theory takes all of this seriously. It treats these points as tests of the second and fourth pillars and not as side issues. The claim made here is about the best overall description of the period. It is not a claim that the period has no faults.

Table 2

Four Pillars of Civilisational Developmentalism and the Conditions That Would Test Them

Pillar	What it means	Frameworks it joins	Evidence used	What would show it wrong
Mass electoral legitimacy	A dominant party with wide support across social groups that still faces real elections	Populism; party-system accounts	79% favourable view of Modi (Huang et al., 2023); BJP 303 seats and alliance 353 in 2019 (Vaishnav & Hintson, 2019); BJP 240 seats in 2024 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026)	Elections become clearly unfair, or support falls sharply across groups
Delivery state	State-led welfare, infrastructure and digital systems that reach citizens directly	Developmental state; platform state	462.5 million accounts opened; UPI 68% of payments by volume (Alonso et al., 2023); extreme poverty 16.2% to 2.3% (Press Information Bureau, 2025)	Gains fade, jobs and inequality worsen, or digital exclusion grows
Civilisational self-assertion	A larger public place for India's own cultural and historical identity	Hindu nationalism; ethnic democracy; civilisational populism	Jaffrelot (2021); Chekirova (2022); Saleem et al. (2022)	Identity politics narrows equal citizenship in law or daily life
Executive-centred but competitive governance	A strong Prime Minister's Office, with continuing party competition and federal politics	Personalism; backsliding debate; comparative illiberalism	Ruparelia (2015); Leake & Chhibber (2024); Kempf (2022); Bertelsmann Stiftung (2026)	Courts, press and opposition lose room to act, or state-level competition ends

Note. The pillars are the author's synthesis of the frameworks in Sections 2 to 8. Poverty figures are from a Government of India summary of World Bank estimates and are being revised.

12. Conclusion

The conclusion of this article is definite. The period since 2014 is best understood as an era of civilisational developmentalism: a phase in which a dominant and widely supported party has used a more capable, digitally connected state to reach citizens directly, and has at the same time given India's own civilisational

identity a larger place in public life. The seven frameworks reviewed here each describe one side of this phase accurately. The proposed name shows how the sides fit together.

The name is positive because of what it points to. It points to a state that reaches millions of citizens more directly than before, to a political order that voters have repeatedly supported at the ballot box, and to a more confident public claim to India's own heritage. It is also honest about its conditions. It will hold only if delivery continues and spreads to jobs and incomes, if elections, courts, the press and the opposition keep real room to work, and if the civilisational claim is understood as belonging to every citizen, whatever their faith or caste. The best future of the era is one in which these three conditions are met together.

For scholars, the proposal opens a clear research agenda. The four pillars can be measured, compared across states and tracked over time. The conditions in Table 2 tell researchers what evidence would support the theory and what would count against it. Narendra Modi's premiership continues as this article is written, so the theory remains open to revision. Even so, a definite name is more useful than an open list of rival labels, because it can be tested, and testing is how the study of this period will move forward.

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