

Modi's India, Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy

Christophe, Jaffrelot. Princeton University Press, 2021, 639.

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Written by renowned author Christophe Jaffrelot and translated by Cynthia Schoch, the voluminous book with over 600 pages gives a unique insight into the Indian political system and its journey from conservative democracy (1950s – 1960s) to the democratization of democracy (late 1980s) to its present form which the author has termed as ethnic democracy or electoral democracy (2014).

In the first part of the book, the author traces the history of Hindu nationalism, which has its roots in several socio-religious reform movements that were initiated following the arrival of Europeans, particularly missionaries to the Indian subcontinent. The author then goes on to explain the ideology of Hindu nationalism and who could be considered as Hindu. In order to defend Hindus from foreign influence, a movement named Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was founded in 1925 with its vast network of affiliates. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a follower of RSS resulted in the state imposing a ban on the organization, which forced RSS to launch its own political party. Thus, Bharatiya Jana Sangh came into being in 1951 and later became Bharatiya Janata Party.

The author discusses in great detail the political journey of India's incumbent Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The author believes that Modi's rise to power, primarily due to his populist stance, marked a turning point in Sangh Parivar's history. Without ignoring the core

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ideology of the movement, Modi brought a new dimension to Hindutva because of his populist style.

The second part of the book begins with a discussion on the term ethnic democracy, which means "some citizens do not have the same rights as others simply because of their religious identity" (p.156). In the case of India, this ethnic democracy found expression in various ways, particularly in Modi's second term. The BJP government, both at the center and the state level, promoted Hindu culture by increasing the legal protection of cows, going after dissidents and shrinking space for NGOs. The situation of minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims, further deteriorated. Both these communities were stigmatized, and campaigns were launched against them by vigilante groups related to Sangh Parivar, particularly the Bajrang Dal. Though Hindu vigilante groups were present prior to Modi's regime, but with Modi at the helm of affairs, these vigilante groups and the violence inflicted by them became more systematic instilling fear in the hearts of minorities. These vigilante groups are not only protected but also sponsored by Sangh Parivar leaders who have either infiltrated into state apparatus or have been elected to office.

Apart from that, massive propaganda campaigns on the internet that slander and spread hatred against minorities is equally active and systematic as the vigilante groups. Thus, Sangh Parivar is working to establish an ethnic democracy by conquering people's minds to impose culture and practices instead of law.

While describing the fate of those resisting the Hinduization of Indian society and are supporters of secularism, the author discusses in detail the case of India's one of the best universities, the Jawaharlal Nehru University. To curtail the progressive outlook of the university, the Modi government appointed people of its choice to head the university and bring the desired change. Besides, the RSS student wing,

Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), which is the largest student organization in India with 3.2 million members in 20,000 of the 35,000 institutions of higher learning (p.178), also played its role in moral policing and indulged in violent acts supported by police. The author then explains how the Modi government went after the NGOs. Among the NGOs that were targets of the Modi government included Greenpeace India, ANHAD (Act Now for Harmony and Democracy), the Lawyers Collective and Citizens for Justice and Peace.

The third part of the book extensively deals with the Indian version of competitive authoritarianism, where the author argues that populism often leads to authoritarianism. He believes national populists are more dangerous for democracies as they tend to ignore and exclude minorities, reducing them to second-class citizens. This itself is anti-democratic and is the case in India as vigilante groups have been let loose on minorities with the patronage of the state. Apart from that, an authoritarian state also tends to exert coercion by waging an attack on constitution and laws and to suppress all opposition. The state also exerts its influence over society by launching propaganda and disinformation campaigns through controlled media. The following chapters of part III discuss in detail how the Modi government has launched an attack on not only political opponents but also important state institutions.

The author then goes on to describe Modi's efforts to curtail judiciary -from delaying the appointment of the Lokpal to delaying the appointment against vacant positions in the Central Information Commission, which is the highest appealing organization under the Right to Information Act of 2005. Similarly, Modi's experience with the Central Bureau of Investigation, the premier investigating agency, which had been investigating cases of fake encounters in Gujarat when Modi was the Chief Minister, also had to bear the brunt once Modi was elected as the Prime Minister of India. Cadres from Gujarat were appointed, and

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CBI was used against dissenting voices. The National Investigation Agency also met the same fate, particularly because it was investigating cases of terrorism where members of Hindu extremist groups were prime suspects. Following the 2014 elections, Hindu terror suspects were either released on bail and later acquitted or were not named in the charge sheet at all. But above all, it was the judiciary which also had to abdicate its powers and independence in the face of Modi's populism turned authoritarianism. The author gives three explanations for the fall of the judiciary. First, the pressure applied by the government, which shook the judiciary; second, Hindu nationalist and like-minded people's infiltration in the judiciary; and finally, the non-confrontational attitude of the judges.

Following judiciary and law enforcement agencies, the Modi government also went after the media, which is considered the fourth pillar of democracy. Modi had an uneasy relationship with the media since his days as chief minister of Gujarat. Once in power, Modi ignored the media and instead communicated directly with the public through Twitter and the monthly radio programme “Mann ki Baat” (p. 299). In order to curtail free media, Modi first reduced advertisements to media groups, media outlets were raided, TV channels were banned, media houses were pressurized to remove dedicated journalists, and all dissenting voices in media had to go through systematic harassment. Denying internet access is another issue in Modi's India.

The author feels that India's shift from national populism to electoral authoritarianism became more obvious during the 2019 election campaign because the electoral competition was not a level playing field due to reasons like the bias of the media and the election commission and the financial resources available at the disposal of the ruling party, i.e., the BJP. The author then goes on to discuss various techniques Modi applied in his election campaign, including building his image as a strongman against Pakistan. Today, as BJP has emerged as

the hegemon in Indian politics, Modi took some most controversial steps, including the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35 A of the Constitution that gave special powers to India, illegally occupying Jammu and Kashmir and introducing Citizenship (Amendment) Act – in both cases, Muslims were the prime targets.

The last chapter of part III exclusively deals with the condition of Muslims under Modi's rule. Though Modi has never expressed any anti-Muslim sentiment in public but it is evident that since Modi came to power, the Muslim presence in important Institutions, including assemblies, has declined. However, the author also blames other political parties for the decline of the Muslim community from public space. Further, in the last couple of years, the judiciary has put a seal on the fate of Indian secularism and the establishment of the Hindu Raj.

This book gives a deep insight into the factors that led to the rise of Narendra Modi to power which in turn has led to the Hinduization of Indian society. The book discusses in detail the negative impact the rise of the BJP under Modi had on the lives of religious minorities, intelligentsia, academics, journalists, or anyone who dares to dissent. This book is a must-read for students of politics and international relations. This book is also a must-read for policymakers to understand the current trends in Indian politics and society so that a cohesive policy can be formulated viz-a-viz our eastern neighbor.