

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Authoritarianism and majoritarian religious nationalism in contemporary India

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Abstract

This first article in the 2024 *World Affairs* special issue examines the Narendra Modi regime in India. Often acerbic political rhetoric is attached to official policies of the regime, creating fear and hopelessness within sections of the population. In this study, five sets of political activities of the government are evaluated. First, cultural authoritarianism became apparent with complicity toward “cow vigilantism,” slapping sedition charges against those showing political dissent, banning the history books of selected progressives, and stereotyping sections of the left and liberals as antinationals. Second, the demonetization policy was implemented without adequately following the economic protocols of the state. Third, the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Bill indicates the thwarting of democratic and federalist ideas. Fourth, the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens exercise in Assam demonstrate the communal-fascist worldview of the regime in profiling population groups. Finally, the sloppy handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the new Information Technology rules show the government's callous approach toward science and privacy. By analyzing such political activities, the article points out that majoritarian religious nationalism, coupled with authoritarianism, has been the ideological expression of the Modi regime, coexisting with both state surveillance and electoral democracy.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, citizenship, communal-fascism, digital surveillance, electoral democracy, fascism, India, islamophobia, majoritarianism, Muslims, Narendra Modi, nationalism, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), religion, religious minorities, special issue

The spread of authoritarianism in recent years seems global (Berberoglu, 2021). Comprehensive academic studies have recently shown that authoritarianism has been the template of governance in many countries spanning various geographical regions ranging from the recent rise of the alt-right in the United States (Waring, 2018), the prevalence of Putinism in Russia (Lewis, 2020), developmental authoritarianism in China guided by the Communist Party (Tang, 2016), the pursuit of authoritarian power in Turkey (Arat & Pamuk, 2019), the emergence of “Hindu authoritarianism” in India (Vanaik, 2017), and “competitive authoritarianism” in Bangladesh (Mostofa, 2021; Mostofa & Subedi, 2020).

Recent academic literature discusses that in contemporary India, particularly after 2014, the turn toward

authoritarian populism with a majoritarian right-wing party led by Narendra Damodardas Modi is a result of the structural problems arising out of the policies of neoliberalization from the 1990s (Mostofa, 2023). The structural problems of jobless growth along with large-scale corruption scandals created a condition when the politics of majoritarianism could use an antagonistic frontier between a discontented “Hindu people” and a “corrupt elite” that appeases the Muslims (Chacko, 2018). In fact, the rise of the right in India can be placed into the larger context of Asia's conservative moment when the prominence of anti-pluralist politics, in the form of cultural nationalism and populism, have, in various ways, become an important feature of contemporary politics in Asia with neoliberal conditions. With the active intervention of Hindu

nationalist politics, Modi's India is shaping state policy, along with increasingly controlling institutions of civil society like the universities and the media (Chacko & Jayasuriya, 2018, p. 533). The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-backed Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) adoption and adaptation of mainstream economic ideas of globalization played an instrumental role in economic growth and job creation and this can be seen clearly during the current regime of Narendra Modi. The aggressive implementation of neoliberal reforms by the Modi regime has in fact created a broader support base of the middle and "neo-middle" classes as "virtuous market citizens" with their roots in the booming corporate sector. These new middle classes view themselves as hardworking enterprising persons and market consumers but whose behavior is regulated by the framework of Hindu nationalism (Chacko, 2019).

According to a global survey of 38 countries conducted by the Pew Research Center during the first half of 2017 (Wike et al., 2017), significant support was noticed for unconstrained executive power. More than 25% of participants thought that a system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts is a good form of government. In recent years, Philippines, Russia, and Turkey have best exemplified such a model. Moreover, while military rule was the least favored political system, more than 50% of respondents expressed support for such a system in Vietnam, Indonesia, India, and South Africa (Wike et al., 2017, p. 4). In the case of India, 53% believed that military rule would be a good thing for the country (Wike et al., 2017, p. 28). By early 2024, a Pew Research Center survey showed that 85% of Indians support a strong leader or a military ruler as a good form of government (Silver and Fetterolf, 2024).

More Indians prefer authoritarian rule with strong men at the helm. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Foundation in the second half of 2019, only 46% favored a democratic form of government, while 48% opined that the country needs a leader with a firm hand (Sahgal et al., 2021, p. 135). A similar result came from the 2019 post-poll survey of the Centre for Study of Developing Society (CSDS), India's foremost psephology institution. The National Election Study (NES) conducted by the CSDS during each parliamentary election posed the following question, among others: "The country should be governed by a strong leader who does not have to bother about winning elections." In 2009, 43.5% agreed with that statement, with around 28.2% strongly agreeing and 15.3% somewhat agreeing (Lokniti, 2009, p. 80). In 2019, a whopping 62.6% agreed with that same statement, with 39.1% fully agreeing and 23.5% somewhat agreeing (Lokniti, 2019, p. 48).

The Global State of Democracy Report (2021) shows worrying signs for Indian democracy. It states

that India is one of the countries suffering from "democratic erosion" (a decline in democratic quality). The prime charges against India have been to use religion as a political weapon and as a strategy by ethnonationalists with poorer performance in civil liberties and checks on government (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance IDEA, 2021, p. 8). India has been considered a

"backsliding democracy with the most democratic violations during the pandemic. Violations include harassment, arrests and prosecution of human rights defenders, activists, journalists, students, academics and others critical of the government or its policies; excessive use of force in the enforcement of Covid-19 regulations; harassment against Muslim minorities; Internet obstructions; and lockdowns, particularly in Kashmir." (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2021, 9)

Since 2015, India has also experienced a decline in conducting "clean elections" along with topping the list of countries in the world in deploying Internet shut-downs during election periods as a frequently used tactic (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2021, p. 14). Other substantive charges include the government's use of laws against cow slaughter and anticonversion to target Muslims, "while sedition and counter-terrorism laws have been used to target human rights defenders, student activists, academics, opposition members and other critics" (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2021, p. 27). Finally, the media repression in the form of Internet disruption in Kashmir and online attacks on journalists have been noted (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2021, p. 31).

India has had a different political experience from many postcolonial states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Right from the birth of the Indian Republic, the country had periodic elections with a multiparty system, unlike the crisis of military or one-party dictatorships in many Afro-Asian and Latin American countries. Among the larger states in South Asia, it has a unique experience of multiparty electoral democracy. Unlike Pakistan and Bangladesh, it has never been governed by military rule for years. It does not have a monarchical form of government as was seen in Nepal, or in present-day Bhutan. However, under Modi's regime, some of the past norms and practices of the effective functioning of the representative system in India have been increasingly violated. Democracy is not just about voting and elections; it also means a host of individual and collective rights expressed through participatory

citizenship, free speech, freedom of the press, the right to information, the codes of pluralism, dissent, and disagreement, and the right to privacy. In this regard, it is prudent to note some authoritarian moves of the Modi regime.

2 | CULTURAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Majoritarian nationalism in India has been using the global context of Islamophobia, already discursively present in the 20th century. In the last few decades, such a majoritarian nationalist outlook has been expressed by the ideological articulations of the RSS and its political outfit, the BJP, in the 1980s and 1990s. What is significant is that from the first decade of the 21st century, the BJP-RSS network has been using social media campaigns, fake news, and viral videos to target Muslims and the Islamic religion. Similarly, the ideological rivals of the BJP-RSS have also explicitly been hounded. Moreover, the police forces have been used to harass and intimidate civil rights activists and journalists with bogus charges of sedition and criminal conspiracy. The BJP's classification of political opposition as "antinational" is an effort to ostracize dissent so that no effective contestation is put forward against their political project blending neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism (Chacko, 2019, pp. 6; 32–34). Several threats to freedom of expression have been the handiwork of either Hindutva activists or the police in those states where the BJP has been in power. Some of them are worth mentioning, given the amount of media attention generated in the recent past.

First, the late U.R. Ananthamurthy, an award-winning Indian writer, received threatening calls for criticizing Modi. Second, a letter by Dina Nath Batra, the convenor of the Hindutva outfit Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti (the Save Education Movement Association), led to the "setting aside" of a publication of a book on violence against women in communal riots in Ahmedabad. In a letter dated May 16, 2014, the publisher Orient Blackswan told the author of the book that Batra's lawyer had written to them in April 2014 complaining about a popular textbook *Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* by Sekhar Bandopadhyay, claiming it was defamatory and derogatory to the RSS. Dinanath Batra had been a veteran of opposing academic freedom. His civil suit led to the pulping of Wendy Doniger's book on Hinduism, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Third, there were attacks on rationalists and free thinkers like M.M. Kalburgi, Narendra Dabholkar, and Gauri Lankesh, along with a systematic attack on academic freedom and dissenting voices in pioneering public universities in India (Islam, 2022, p. 150). Fourth, a whistle-blower pediatrician, Dr. Kafeel Khan, was harassed,

suspended from government service, and sent to jail in a fake case related to the deaths of around 80 children in a government hospital in Gorakhpur in August 2017 (Awasthi, 2022). Fifth, scores of civil rights activists, lawyers, and academics were arrested in June and August 2018 in connection with an incident of violence in Bhima Koregaon near Pune on January 1, 2018. Further arrests were made in April 2020. The arrested activists have been designated the label "urban Naxals" with the allegations that they intended to plot the assassination of the Indian prime minister (Shantha, 2022). Sixth, a Kerala journalist, Siddique Kappan, was picked up by Uttar Pradesh police in October 2020. He has been framed for charges of sedition, inciting Muslims to commit violence, hurting religious sentiments, and terrorism while he was on his way to cover the news of gang rape and murder of a Dalit girl in Hathras (Harlankar, 2021). No wonder India's rank in the press freedom index has been progressively worse since 2014 (see Table 1).

India's rank was 80 in the inaugural report of 2002. Then it fell to 122 in 2010 and 131 in 2012 during the second term of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government. Reporters without Borders (RSF, 2021) notes that Modi has been a predator of press freedom in India since he became prime minister by spreading disinformation and flooding mainstream media with speeches that legitimize his ideological overtones. Moreover, the army of online trolls supporting the majoritarian nationalist ideology continuously focuses the radar on any dissenting journalist while imposing a threat of life imprisonment with a highly vague charge of sedition (RSF, 2021).

The threat and intimidation of the Hindutva activists have grown during the Modi regime. Apart from mob-based collective cow vigilantism, there is a conspiracy theory by the *Hindutva* activists accusing Muslim men

TABLE 1 India's rank in press freedom index out of 180 countries.

Year	Rank
2014	140
2015	136
2016	133
2017	136
2018	138
2019	140
2020	142
2021	142
2022	150

Note: India's rank further slipped to 161 in 2023.

Source: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking> of different years.

of wooing Hindu women to force them to convert to Islam. Such a conspiracy theory is labelled as “love jihad.” In 2020, Uttar Pradesh was the first state to introduce a “love jihad law” banning religious conversion for marital purposes (Frayer, 2021). Similar laws were enacted in other BJP-ruled states like Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, and, like Uttar Pradesh, the law has a provision of a jail term and a fine (Langa, 2021). At the same time, another BJP-ruled state, Karnataka, has also passed an anti-cow slaughter Bill (Arakal, 2020). The anti-cow slaughter laws are already in place in various states in India, barring West Bengal, Kerala, Tripura, Goa, and most of the north-eastern states.

New anticonversion laws have been passed or are being planned to pass in many BJP-ruled states, which will complement the “love jihad” laws targeted against religious minorities and interfaith couples (Ahmad, 2018; Poddar, 2022). There has been another exercise of reconverting those persons back to Hinduism who had previously been converted to other religions like Islam and Christianity. This process is called *ghar wapsi* (literally meaning “homecoming”) in the RSS vocabulary to welcome those who had left the abode of Hinduism. Most cases are forceful conversions of religious minorities to Hinduism (Katju, 2015). Anti-cow slaughter laws, anti-conversion laws, the so-called “love jihad” laws and the *ghar wapsi* directly challenge India's constitutional values of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and practice, and liberty of the individual to pursue a particular way of life.

From 2014 onward, the BJP's social media cell has contributed to the spread of fake news, propaganda against religious minorities, discrediting political opposition, and individual dissent against BJP leadership. Its unchallenged parliamentary strength, combined with the massive use of social media, had created a religious extremist discourse that favors a beef ban, *ghar wapsi*, the revocation of article 370 in Kashmir, and the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. The majoritarian and inflammatory discourse on social media has led to incidents of communal violence that have roots in the aggressive campaigns of the Hindutva narrative (Bhatnagar, 2022).

In a recent Annual Report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF, 2021) identified India as a country of particular concern, which continues a negative trajectory from earlier years with specific reference to violations of religious freedom in the world's largest electoral democracy. It mentions anticonversion laws, disinformation about anti-CAA protests, and using the COVID-19 pandemic to incite violence and the targeting of religious minorities (USCIRF, 2021). The arbitrariness of the Modi regime was exposed with the recent reports of the Economist Intelligence Unit in which India dropped from the overall score of 7.92 in

2014, when Modi became the prime minister, to 6.61 in 2020, briefly rising to 7.04 in 2022 in the Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2022, p. 16). However, under the parameters of political culture, India's score is a low 5.63, and for civil liberties, the score is just 6.18, with the country being classified as a flawed democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2022, p. 45).

Previously, the cow vigilantes—or those involved in intimidating tactics—were regarded as marginal. But in recent years, they have become a part of the mainstream public culture of mob lynching in India (Patel, 2021). In the Dharma Sansad (religious parliament) event of Haridwar organized during December 17–19, 2021, *Hindutva* leaders called for a genocide of Muslims with a tremendous outpour of hate speech (The Wire Analysis, 2021). Two online apps named “Sulli Deals” and “Bulli Bai” hosted on Github showcased virtual auctions of Muslim women who were active on social media. The hate machine has taken recourse to Islamophobic slurs and all kinds of anti-Muslim narratives (Salim, 2022). Overall, the above-mentioned incidents and practices by the *Hindutva* activists amply show that India is at this moment in the grip of a horrible kind of cultural authoritarianism. The re-election of Yogi Adityanath led the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh—India's largest state, albeit with a reduced majority in terms of seats but getting over 41% votes—with a positive swing of 1.62% votes from the last 2017 assembly elections. This demonstrates that the rule of cultural authoritarianism can get consent from significant sections of the electorate.

3 | DEMONETIZATION AND ECONOMIC AUTHORITARIANISM

On November 8, 2016, the prime minister of India announced the policy of demonetization with effect from November 9, 2016. The Ministry of Finance of the Government of India, via a gazette notification dated November 8, 2016, implemented the demonetization plan by ceasing the legal tender of high denomination notes of INR 500 and INR 1000 that amounted to 86% of the total currency in circulation. The gazette notification's justification was that it was a way of curbing fake currency, unaccounted wealth, smuggling, and terrorism (Ministry of Finance, Government of India, 2016). The demonetization policy was implemented without adequately following the economic protocols of the state. It was done clandestinely and was imposed from above as a classic move of economic authoritarianism often used by dictators. In fact, it was argued by a legal expert that how the demonetization notification issued by the government went beyond the scope of what is permitted under the

Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934 and hence was illegal. This was because of the following reasons.

“[N]either the RBI Act, nor the Banking Regulation Act, 1949, empower the government to impose restrictions on cash withdrawals or deposits in the manner it has been done, and to discriminate between holders and non-holders of bank accounts, as the present notification has done. Such actions require an authorising legislation, either an Act of Parliament or an Ordinance. Both in 1946, and in 1978, similar actions were authorised by an ordinance. The failure to issue an ordinance to provide the legal basis for the demonetisation notification this time renders the demonetisation exercise illegal.” (Wahi, 2016a)

Moreover, there was a *prima facie* case of the abridgement of fundamental rights to movement, trade or business, livelihood, and, in the case of those who died, life, equality, and the constitutional right to property (Wahi, 2016b). The decision caused massive economic disruptions and hugely hit the informal sector. Within a month of the implementation of the policy, it took more than a hundred lives of individuals who were waiting in long queues of banks for getting rationed money or for changing old currencies (Worstell, 2016). Nearly all banknotes scrapped by the demonetization decision came back to the banking system, with only a trifling 0.0008% of total notes in circulation being counterfeit, as reported by the RBI in 2016–17. A reputed economist regarded the entire exercise as a grand hoax (Bardhan, 2019, p. 179). The black money and terrorist funding were hardly curbed, as is evident from several terror attacks after the 2016–17 demonetization exercise. The Terror attack in February 2019 in Pulwama is a case in point.

4 | THE JAMMU AND KASHMIR BILL AND ATTACK ON INDIAN FEDERALISM

In August 2019, months after returning to power with a resounding majority, the Modi regime passed the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Bill. The bill dismantled the temporary provision for Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) as enshrined in Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. The bill broke the state into two union territories of Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir. It mentioned that Ladakh would remain as a union territory. By contrast, the new union territory of J&K would regain its status as a state with its legislature after the delimitation exercise. This was done without

any consultation, debate, or discussion in the then J&K legislature and was imposed from the top with the help of the then governor of the state, appointed by the central government. Once the bill was passed in the parliament, all major leaders of non-BJP parties were placed under house arrest. This particular act of the government indicates the thwarting of democratic and federalist ideas. A reputed legal expert has argued that Article 370 should not be interpreted as a temporary provision but a permanent provision in the constitution that assures J&K autonomy and is part and parcel of federalism and, hence, the basic structure of the Indian Constitution. The abrogation of Article 370 was a massive blow to the sentiments of the people of J&K and the principle of recognition of diversity in India by the constitution (Mustafa, 2019). The passing of the 2019 J&K bill showed that, on any day, the central government could pass a bill and carve out a specific geographical territory within an existing province under the administrative jurisdiction of a state government and can make it a union territory directly governable by the central government. In such a manner, it can arbitrarily issue an ordinance to minimize the control and power of any state government in India over a particular geographical territory. The dissolution of Article 370 had been a long demand of the RSS besides their other goals like building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya in place of the Babri Mosque that was demolished on December 6, 1992, and introducing the Uniform Civil Code in India by repealing all existing personal laws. In December 2023, the Supreme Court of India upheld the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution.

5 | THE CITIZENSHIP AMENDMENT ACT AND THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS

During the 2014–2019 term of the BJP-led central government in India, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam was implemented, and correspondingly, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed in the Indian Parliament in December 2019. The new CAA proposed to amend the Citizenship Act of 1955. In effect, it discriminates between Muslim and non-Muslim illegal immigrants from neighboring South Asian countries. The Act's provisions declare Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan as not illegal migrants while reducing the time required for such persons from these countries to obtain citizenship by naturalization from 11 years to six years. Muslims from these countries were excluded from following this path to citizenship. The above provisions in the bill have thus discriminated between the Muslim and non-Muslim minorities, the countries chosen, and the

religious minorities of those countries chosen. For example, besides Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, other neighboring countries of India—namely, Myanmar, China, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan—were not chosen from where persecuted religious minorities could come to take shelter in India and after six years of residence in India could be eligible to take citizenship by naturalization. Ostensibly, this bill fulfils the BJP's 2014 election manifesto to grant citizenship to Hindus fleeing persecution in the Muslim-majority countries neighboring India.

Gauba and Singh (2017) argue that the bill is simply a cover for remaking the notion of Indian citizenship from a secular conception to a religious one. This argument has some merit. If the Indian government were genuine about sheltering vulnerable minorities (it has, after all, included Sikhs, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists, and Christians within the ambit of the law), it would have included Baha'is, Shias, and Ahmadiyyas, among others. They face persecution in Sunni-Muslim-majority countries for being insufficiently or improperly Islamic. Even the Tamil-speaking Hindus of Sri Lanka fleeing persecution at the hands of Sinhala Buddhists have been deemed unworthy of inclusion in the bill (Gauba & Singh, 2017).

Indeed, had the union government shown some genuine empathy for persecuted minorities, then it would have stated religious, ethnic, racial, and political persecution in the amendment bill and would have also included Myanmar and its persecuted Rohingya Muslim minorities who face tremendous repression along with the situation of the Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists in China that have raised much concern globally (Bhat, 2019). The exclusion of Myanmar, a country that shares borders with India and the inclusion of Afghanistan that effectively does not share a frontier with India's international border, specifically emphasizes the Muslim majority neighboring countries of India in the bill. Otherwise, there is no justification for excluding other South Asian countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan from the bill. Besides, the amendment bill also excluded Jews and those of "No Religion." This is significant as these categories are recognized and recorded by the Indian Census and when there have been systematic attacks on atheist and secular bloggers in both Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The CAA and the NRC exercise in Assam, which was completed in 2019, demonstrate the communal-fascist worldview of the regime in profiling population groups. This has been the worst form of religious profiling, and religious discrimination institutionalized through a legal exercise in independent India. Massive disruptions of population groups were noted in the most affected state of Assam. The final list of the NRC was out on August 31, 2019. It excluded a little over 1.9 million inhabitants in Assam. Any person can appeal before the Foreigners' Tribunals within 120 days after

the publication of the final NRC list in Assam if someone is unsatisfied with the outcome of the NRC exercise. Until the Foreigners Tribunals declare anyone a foreigner, those excluded from the final NRC list cannot be detained. Moreover, if someone is still unhappy with the decision of the Foreigners' Tribunal, they can approach the Guwahati High Court and the Supreme Court. In the meantime, those who are declared illegal migrants by the Foreigners' Tribunals could be taken to detention camps and locked therein until their deportation to their native country (India Today, 2019). However, the government has no accurate information on the exact number of illegal migrants, including unlawful Bangladeshi migrants in India (Das & Bose, 2018). In updating the NRC list in Assam, there has also been an instance of excluding the name of a former army officer and Kargil war veteran who has been ridiculously declared a foreigner (Karmakar, 2019). Thus, the NRC exercise has raised several doubts because of the callous approach and lack of adequate technological, professional, and human resources to conduct such a monumental task.

The heightened rhetoric against so-called Bangladeshi "infiltrators" was noted during Modi's election campaign of 2014 for the Lok Sabha, later complemented by the current home minister of India, equating Bangladeshi immigrants as "termites" (Islam, 2022, pp. 156–157). The acerbic rhetoric against immigrants with threats to throw them out of the country in the form of hate speech has been a feature of the alt-right forces globally. The xenophobic character of right-wing populists in parts of Europe and North America is being echoed in the articulatory practice of the BJP leadership in India as well.

6 | MISHANDLING OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

During the epidemiological crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, initially, the RSS was clueless. During the initial days of the pandemic in 2020, it had nothing to offer except to promote some superstitious beliefs and assert that the disease had its origins in China and, thus, was a result of globalization. Such a rhetorical move was followed by some attempts to boycott Chinese goods and software. This is in sync with the old Swadeshi rhetoric of the RSS. The surplus population of India was often distracted and engaged in free entertaining activities in the form of religious rituals like beating utensils and lighting candles at home to resist COVID-19. The migrant workers who were stuck during the sudden announcement of a countrywide lockdown during the first wave of the pandemic caused utter distress. The Shilan pujas followed such a despicable event to start building the

Ram temple in Ayodhya in the presence of the prime minister and the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. A huge concentration of people was noted during the Shilan pujas on August 5, 2020, without following appropriate COVID-19 protocols. The second wave of the pandemic in 2021 showed horrific images of dead bodies flowing in the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh. Poverty-stricken families could not cremate those who lost their lives during the pandemic. The large informal sector is structurally located in such a situation that the preventive measures recommended by scientific experts were impossible to follow. This was combined with the hapless condition of many poor slum dwellers in India who could hardly maintain social distancing norms, given that they already lived with inadequate sanitary measures and inappropriate health infrastructure. India ranked second in the world in COVID-19 infections in July 2022 (Worldometer, 2022) and more recently, detailed figures have not changed that rank.¹

The culture of popular science in India has been so eroded in the last three decades that an alternative rationalist discourse did not counter the superstitious beliefs and irrational rituals in combating COVID-19. This has partly to do with a fundamental shift in the Indian state's approach toward scientific outlooks, popularizing science education and fighting irrational viewpoints from the 1970s onward. The decades of the 1980s and 1990s further eroded the Indian state's will to build a new scientific personality, the desire of the decolonial state during the Nehruvian era. By the late 1990s, when the majoritarian nationalist party, the BJP—backed by the communal-fascist movement of the RS—came to power, the approach was to programmatically change the politico-ideological and cultural orientation of higher education with initiatives to propose new streams like astrology, yogic sciences, Karmakand, and so forth, which are part and parcel of pseudo-science. Since the secular opposition to the ruling party was relatively stronger at that time, such a move was resisted. But once the majoritarian religious-nationalist party came to power with a solid electoral majority in 2014, and again came back with a more significant majority in 2019, the wish to fulfil the core demands of India's political right came to the fore.

In 2021, the Pegasus spyware scandal broke out. The NSO Group, an Israeli surveillance firm, developed the spyware. Generally, the firm sells the technology only to governments. In this respect, the Indian government was asked by public litigation activists whether it had used the technology to snoop on the telephones of various opposition leaders and journalists whose names emerged in the July 2021 report of Amnesty International. The high-tech spyware intrudes

on the phones of targeted victims without even letting them know that the victim's data could be stolen (Mazoomdaar, 2021). Some experts who propagate software freedom suggest that such spyware makes India a “surveillance state” (Choudhary, 2021). In response to the public litigations, the Union Government of India made a limited affidavit by denying all allegations and argued that the matter involved national security questions that rendered it beyond judicial scrutiny. They, therefore, did not wish to put the details in a public affidavit to avoid public debate. However, the Supreme Court of India ordered a thorough enquiry into allegations of unauthorized surveillance. It recommended an independent probe by experts chosen by the Court, pointing out that the government cannot consistently deny judicial scrutiny every time on the pretext of national security (Ananthakrishnan, 2021). It was only because of the intervention of the Supreme Court that the vital issue of alleged state surveillance is being investigated. But there could be several other incidents of state surveillance that breach the privacy concerns of citizens that continue to go unreported. India's privacy laws are weak, and the Pegasus scandal only showed how the Indian state could take advantage of such a situation.

In February 2021, the new rules of India's Information Technology Act (2000) were stipulated. One aspect of the regulations is tracking the first originator under Rule 5(2). Such a provision has been perceived by many as contentious and problematic. Although it is an attempt to curb the spread of fake news and illegal activities over messaging applications, cyber experts fear that this could eventually override the end-to-end encryption, allowing for the formation of a surveillance state (Dalmia, 2021). Many believe that there could be a misuse of discretionary power by the relevant authority in tracking the originator of any web content. Notably, members of the media fraternity emphasize the Rule's implementation to dissolve freedom of speech (Dalmia, 2021).

The Aadhar issued by the unique identification authority in India and its compulsory usage in everyday Indian life in opening up bank accounts, filing taxes, getting government benefits, and several financial transactions had already entrenched Indians within the purview of the electronically networked architecture of digital surveillance. The proposed National Social Registry, in the form of a comprehensive database, will enable the government to keep track of the most important aspects of the life of every Indian (Shrivastava, 2020). The Pegasus scandal and the new IT rules are just addenda to the increasing tendency of the Indian state to enhance new arsenals in the capacity of the state for digital surveillance. The digital surveillance mechanisms of the existing model in China—including targeted repression and a decline in universal redistribution that makes citizens worse off

¹See <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (accessed March 21, 2024).

because of improved government information in dictatorial conditions (Xu, 2021)—could be emulated in India.

7 | ASSESSMENT OF THE MODI REGIME: LEFT AND LIBERAL OPINIONS

In 2013, leading public intellectual and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argued that Modi was not fit to lead India when the debate within the BJP was ongoing about the party's prime ministerial candidate for the 2014 parliamentary elections. His justification was that since Modi could not protect religious minorities as the chief minister of a major state in India, he could not look after religious minorities as the prime minister of the largest electoral democracy in India. As a consistent liberal, Sen had been defending the ideals of India's secular democracy and bravely remarked that Modi would not get his vote (India Today, 2013). The very same year, distinguished author Amitav Ghosh was worried that Modi could destabilize India and contended that Modi would not get his vote too (Outlook, 2013). After Modi came to power in the May 2014 elections, Ghosh (2014) made a brilliant assessment underlining key similarities between Modi and the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Ghosh identified genuine analytical counterparts between the personalities of Erdogan and Modi along with the political paths of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (or AKP) and the Hindu-nationalist RSS-BJP, the collapse of the secular Kemalist political establishment in Turkey and the similar doom of the Nehruvian Congress, and the waning of the Left in Turkey and India. He made the most vivid scrutiny of the political route of the Turkish nation-state and the Indian nation-state. He correctly pointed out the state of affairs that had led to the emergence of both Modi and Erdogan (Ghosh, 2014). Prakash Karat, the ideologue of the largest communist party in India—namely, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—endorsed Ghosh for pointing out the resemblances between Erdogan and Modi. Karat argued that the commonality between Modi and Erdogan is expressed through the political form of authoritarianism and asserted strongly that the nature of the present Indian state under Modi is authoritarian (Karat, 2016). Karat pointed out that the Indian state could become authoritarian under Modi, much like in 1975. In other words, the danger of revisiting authoritarianism is real in a context when the mix of neoliberal market fundamentalism and Hindutva is a fact and, thus, a pure recipe for disastrous authoritarianism (Karat, 2015a). Such an assessment is different from the classic literature of some liberal and left-wing intellectuals who had earlier assessed RSS as a communal-fascist organization in the aftermath of the

Babri Mosque demolition on December 6, 1992, followed by communal riots in India. Amartya Sen innovatively coined the term “communal-fascism” in a Lecture titled ‘The Idea of India’ at Trinity College Cambridge on February 5, 1993, a couple of months after the Babri demolition. In this respect, Aijaz Ahmad, a prominent Marxist intellectual aligned with the largest communist party in India, aptly describes the BJP and the RSS in the following manner:

The BJP functions as a political party but is, in its essence, a right-wing front of the extreme right that is represented primarily by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Instead, they train hundreds of thousands of their cadres to build a well-oiled, invincible electoral machine for contest at the polls. They do propose many significant changes in the Indian constitution. However, there is no rhetoric against constitutional, liberal democratic form as such (Ahmad, 2017).

In recent years, the difference between the BJP, the persona of Modi, and the slow proselytization of RSS by its numerous volunteers at the grassroots level have been made by the Indian Left. Thus, framing Modi-style authoritarianism backed by the RSS—whose agenda is to create an authoritarian Hindu Rashtra within the formal constitutional order through strict laws and implementing authoritarian policies—is the new hallmark of majoritarian nationalism in India (Karat, 2015b, pp. 7–15). In such a context, Aijaz Ahmad succinctly pointed out the original mission of the RSS and how it operates in India:

The RSS was founded..., in 1925, on an uncannily Gramscian principle that enduring political power can arise only on the basis of a prior cultural transformation and consent, and this broad-based cultural consent to the extreme right's doctrines can only be built through a long historical process, from the bottom up. What follows from this ideological articulation of the long-term strategy is that if the RSS succeeds in constituting a certain sort of social subjectivity for the great majority of Hindus in India who are said to constitute some 80 per cent of the Indian population...and if they can all be unified, positively, in pursuit of a civilisational mission, and, negatively, in permanent opposition to a fancied enemy (Muslim and Christian minorities in the countries), as the Nazis sought to unite the German nation against the Jews, then the demographic majority can be

turned into a permanent political majority (Ahmad, 2017).

Modi's regime has been also described as populist with an exclusivist majoritarian tilt that is inspired by the political ideology of Hindu nationalism. The majoritarian project of Hindu nationalism defines the Indian people as essentially "Hindu" while excluding other non-Hindu populations from the core base of authentic citizens of India. Other minorities might practice their religion in private, but in the public sphere, they have to show allegiance to Hindu identitarian symbols. In this regard, the Westernized secular elites who defend secularism and pluralism instead of the Hindu identity of the Indian nation-state are regarded as the prime political opponents of such a majoritarian and Hindu nationalist variety of populism. This is different from the pro-poor populism of Indira Gandhi, the peasant populism of Charan Singh, or the regional variations of southern populism in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017).

8 | THE MODI REGIME: AUTHORITARIAN OR FASCIST?

After analyzing a series of political moves of the BJP in recent years and assessing some leftist and liberal opinions on the BJP-led government, a relevant question to ask is how to classify the Modi-led regime. Is it authoritarian or fascist? Some of the assessments of the left-wing theoreticians make it a point to underscore similarities between the Nazi organization and the RSS. While there is absolutely no doubt about the fascination of the RSS toward the Nazis and their imitation of the Nazis in building up their organization, one has to make a nuanced difference between the BJP and the RSS. The former has to contest elections and is therefore accountable to the people. In contrast, the latter does not contest elections and is not directly accountable to the people, although it continues to be the ideological inspiration of the BJP. The BJP, while fighting elections, also has to adopt various populist measures that do not always gel well with the ideological purity of the RSS.

In the mid-1970s, when the Indian state was evidently authoritarian under Indira Gandhi, a left-wing analysis differentiated between Caesarism and fascism while characterizing the Indira Gandhi regime as a case of Caesarism (Chatterjee, 1997, pp. 35–57). Even now, within sections of the Indian Left, there remains some fascination with the analysis of fascism made by Communist International in 1928 or that of the United Front thesis put forward by Georgi Dimitrov (1938). The general features of fascism as presented by the Comintern were cited from the Marxist theoretician Rajani Palme Dutt's work *Fascism and Social*

Revolution, while making a distinction between the European cases of fascism and the Indian case of Caesarism: (1) Fascism constructs an economic basis for the organizational unity of large capitalists, rural exploiters, and the urban petty bourgeoisie; (2) Fascism rapidly adopts a foreign policy of militarism and imperialist aggression; (3) Taking advantage of the weaknesses of social democracy, fascism mobilizes an organized force of cadres from the urban petty bourgeoisie and the backward sections of the working class; (4) In the stage of seizure of power, fascism adopts populist slogans against capitalism, but soon after it captures power, it comes under the sway of big capital; (5) In place of liberal democracy, fascism establishes a structure of direct authoritarian rule (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 55). The United Front document by Dimitrov (1938, pp. 216–222) recognizes fascism and equates it with war.

Nevertheless, the European parallel of the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s is not valid in India. Today, the context has drastically changed from a time when there was a powerful communist state like the Soviet Union. There is only one commonality (targeting religious minorities) between Hitler's Nazi regime and India under the BJP. True, the Muslims are the softest target of the regime, and hence the term "communal fascism" can be at best labelled toward the RSS. However, Dimitrov's analysis of fascism is not valid in the Indian case. There is hardly any aggressive imperialist foreign and militarist policy of the Indian state under the Modi regime, like waging war with a foreign country. At most, there have been occasional skirmishes on the borders with Pakistan and China during this regime, which has been nothing new to the present time. Before coming to power, the anticapitalist calls of both Hitler and Mussolini were missing in the BJP's rhetoric. The BJP, led by Modi, came to power with the promise to deliver a corporate capital-led development just like when he was the chief minister of Gujarat. Thus, at best, the ideological expression of the RSS is communal-fascist but not that of the BJP. The latter is populist with the cult authoritarian figure of Modi at its head.

Modi hardly meets the press or answers questions from the media directly. His connection to the people is through All India Radio's *Mann ki Baat* (Talk of the Mind) program. On momentous occasions or regarding important announcements, his televised speeches are monologues. The RSS-BJP combination has meticulously cultivated the religious symbolic values and beliefs of the Hindu community in India that has made them successful in mobilizing multiple classes and different caste sectors of the majority population. This challenges the class-centric analysis of the support base of fascism as enumerated in the classic Marxist doctrine. The orthodox class-centric approach of Dimitrov and others on the European Left in analyzing

fascism has long been questioned in the West due to European fascism's popular appeal of mobilizing different sectors of the population in a context of tremendous political crisis of both the liberal and the left-wing forces (Laclau, 1979, pp. 81–142). Thus, a rigid and orthodox class analysis of fascism by applying Dimitrov's thesis became redundant long ago.

9 | CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE PERSONALITY CULT OF MODI AND DURABLE AUTOCRACY IN INDIA

The recent experience of India's populist democracy has an anchor ideological frame. This ideological frame is the right-wing populist articulation of Narendra Damodardas Modi, whose articulatory practice can be regarded as *Moditva* and who has been able to add something more to the existing religio-cultural nationalism of the RSS, which from its very inception in 1925 had a majoritarian nationalist outlook. The electoral success of Modi as India's prime minister by mobilizing significant sections of the Indian population—corporate capital, media, middle classes, Hindutva activists, “Other Backward Classes,” and Dalits along with the poor—has fundamentally challenged the liberal conception of democracy that was cherished by the Nehruvian elites in India (Islam, 2019, pp. 24–42). Modi is different from the fascists of 20th-century Europe. His style of functioning and his politics are different from the traditional Hindutva agenda of the RSS as well, although the latter's organizational network supports him. There has been a division of labor between Modi and the RSS. The former has been interested in boosting economic growth based on trade and industry that he delivered as the Gujarat chief minister. The latter has been interested in ideologically manipulating institutions of higher learning and culture along with targeting various shades of Indian progressives, particularly the left, liberal, and the Dalit-Bahujan intelligentsia (Islam, 2022, 137).

Modi rose to prominence as a prime ministerial candidate of the BJP in 2013 after spending years in the RSS and later in the BJP before becoming three-time chief minister of Gujarat (Marino, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2013; Nag, 2013). Modi's personality has been often customized as “digital narcissism” with curated efforts to post selfies on Twitter during his official visits to foreign countries. He enjoys this “showman” image and the applause while performing both on the world stage and during election campaigns (Whitehead, 2016, pp. 168–69). Modi's diplomatic missions have likewise been to sell the image of India as a leading power, further liberalizing the economy tied with a mode of confident globalization while celebrating the old civilizational identity (like the Chinese have) and a strategic goal of sustaining high

economic growth (Raja Mohan, 2015, pp. 201–14). However, the foreign policy focus under Modi has become shriller toward Pakistan rather than taking fuller advantage of India's position as an emerging power. Besides, there have been significant deficits in developing sophisticated indigenous technologies for strategic defense equipment, which, in effect, made the government pay billions to buy defense equipment from foreign countries (Karnad, 2018).

Before becoming the prime minister, Modi was celebrated within sections of the media and among economists to have delivered the “Gujarat model of development” with a massive drive for industrialization, urbanization, and a technology-centric knowledge-based economy (Mahurkar, 2014). After becoming the prime minister, his personality cult has been inflated much more through his active presence on social media and the building of the so-called ‘Brand Modi’ image that he had personally invested in by hiring professional agencies and lobbyists besides making good relations with top corporations in India (Menon, 2014).

The authoritarian tendencies of the Indian government led by Modi are often expressed in terms of an increasing number of ordinances and bills passed in the parliament without any debate (Jerath, 2020). For example, out of the 13 bills that were passed in the winter session of the parliament in 2021, 11 were passed without a debate (Tribune News Service, 2021), including the withdrawal of the three contentious farm bills that were similarly passed in June 2020 without any debate and discussion in the parliament (Kapur, 2022). Similarly, 20 bills were passed in the monsoon session of the parliament in 2021 without debate (Sharma & Anand, 2021). This has been a trend since the days of the UPA. According to one study in 2017, the Indian Parliament passed 47% of bills without debate from 2007 to 2017. The average number of days the parliament ran in the same period was 64–67 days per year. Between 1952 and 1972, the House ran for between 128 and 132 (Chatterjee, 2017). An expert has argued that passing bills in the parliament without discussion is a recipe for bad laws and requires judicial intervention to stop such malpractices (Achary, 2021). A former official of India's Rajya Sabha secretariat has pointed out that the important bills in recent years—ranging from the farm bills, the Constitution Amendment Bill abrogating Jammu and Kashmir's special status, the Citizenship Amendment Act, to the Triple Talaq and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Bill—were not referred to any of the standing committees of parliament for in-depth deliberation on a nonpartisan basis by taking into account of the inputs from a variety of stakeholders (Sahu, 2020).

There has also been a growing trend of passing ordinances to implement a government policy. In fact, in seven years between May 2014 and April 2021, the

BJP-led NDA government under the prime ministership of Modi has passed 76 ordinances that far surpass the number of 61 bills passed altogether by the previous Congress-led UPA government in ten years from May 2004 to May 2014 (Chatterji, 2021). Such malpractices were possible because of the brute majority of the current Modi-led regime.

However, authoritarian regimes need not be unstable. The Chinese experience shows they can be stable by decentralizing the authoritarian power with a unique system of incentives to local party functionaries and controlling local elites (Landry, 2008). Sometimes authoritarian regimes give space to routinized social protests like in China since the early 1990s. The political structure in reformist China has encouraged contentious bargaining between the government and the ordinary people, which contributed to the resilience of the Chinese political system. Thus, it is always not true that authoritarian regimes repress collective protests and that popular action destabilizes authoritarian regimes (Chen, 2012). In Russia, Putin's authoritarian government has used both ethnicity and religion to its advantage to sustain a more extended period of authoritarian rule (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2016). The BJP's brute majority in the Indian parliament, with Modi's image of a decisive and strong leader, has facilitated the establishment of an authoritarian regime in contemporary India. Moreover, the regime's ability to accommodate democratic demands like the withdrawal of the farm bills, cash transfers to farmers, and various forms of doles to targeted population groups has helped Modi to set up a durable autocratic system in India in a context of a weak opposition and an absence of a credible mass leader at the national level.

But it is wrong to say that authoritarianism and communal fascism arose out of only a crisis in the neoliberal order or with a crisis of the liberal appeal of the Congress Party. The political ideology of *Hindutva* is constitutive of authoritarianism as it derives its inspiration from a discursive tradition that selectively uses parts of a narrative of an organized religion and offers a counter-narrative to the so-called Euro-American political ideologies like liberalism and Marxism by identifying certain political elements and parties like the Congress and the Communists as their ultimate enemies. At the same time, the autonomy of the political ideology of *Hindutva* expressed in terms of majoritarian religious nationalism right from the 1920s has targeted both Muslims and Christians as their prime enemies. Of late, Modi has been trying to reach the Christians, which is evident from the regime's move to include the community within the CAA. At the same time, Modi's new tactic is to accommodate Muslims by rhetorically communicating a message like from *Sab ka saath, sab ka vikas* ("with everyone and growth for all") in 2014 to *sab ka vishwas* ("earning loyalty/faith from all") after winning the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Recently, Modi aligned himself publicly with the Muslim community to celebrate the recent Eid-uz-zuha in 2022. The ideology of *Moditva* is not a macro-ideology like liberalism, socialism, or conservatism, and totalitarian ideologies like fascism or communism (Freeden, 2003, pp. 78–93). Instead, it is an autonomous political ideology that can be treated as what Freeden (2003, pp. 94–102) calls "thin" or "micro-ideology." *Moditva* is a significant micro-ideology that any opponent of Modi must properly grasp to fight him and his regime instead of only blaming neoliberalism as the necessary reason for the emergence of majoritarian nationalism. After all, majoritarian religious nationalism in contemporary India in the form of authoritarian populism of *Moditva* is successful because it has created hegemony among the Indian people and India's electoral democracy after its first attempt failed in the 1990s with the leadership of Vajpayee. The future of Indian authoritarianism will depend on the outcome of the 2024 Indian parliamentary elections.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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