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Making sense of Modi and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government: Hindu Nationalism in power

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Introduction

On May 27, 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government completed the full five-year term in office. Although part of a coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which includes regional parties, this was the first majority party government in India since 1984. Led by the charismatic Narendra Modi, the BJP came to power on an anti-corruption wave against the Congress administration and with a promise of a new development programme for India's youth. Before 2014, Hindu nationalist parties had struggled to capture more than a quarter of the electorate's votes, but the BJP crossed this threshold securing 31 per cent, shattering the long-held presumption that an ideological party was incompatible with the centrist nature of India's democracy. This breakthrough, as we shall see below, was followed by the implementation of policies promoting *Hindutva* (Hinduness) that have brought into prominence the cultural politics of *Bharat* – an India that has until now remained marginalised. As the BJP and its allies begin a second term in office, it is appropriate to reflect on the experience of Hindu nationalism in government.

Most assessments of a government's record in administration focus on the evaluation of manifesto policies against actual achievements. Sáez and Singh (2012), for example, provide a systematic assessment of the first United Progressive Alliance government (2004-09), covering aspects of domestic and foreign policies, with a special emphasis on state secularism, religious minorities and ethnic conflict. Such an appraisal of the BJP-led NDA government is problematic for two reasons. First, insufficient time has elapsed for us to undertake a rigorous review of the government's policies which include, not least, the difficulties researchers have encountered in critically engaging with the administration itself. [i]

Second, in reviewing what is potentially a transformative government there is need to move beyond evaluatory frameworks of public policy to a more interpretive understanding that reflects the seismic changes in Indian politics today.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive account of the BJP-led NDA government's policies, but rather to contribute to how we can better comprehend the experience of Hindu nationalism in power. The first section of the paper therefore maps the broad narrative of the BJP in office, outlining some key developments. The second section, in contrast, offers an overview of the competing approaches through which these developments have been framed. For reasons outlined above, any assessment at this stage by its very nature must remain provisional. This preliminary exercise therefore is offered as a contribution to the greater effort that will be necessary for more conceptual and methodological clarity to evaluate what is evidently a new phase in the history of India's democracy.

Hindu nationalism in government: an overview

On February 14, 2019, a convoy of security personnel in Pulwama, Kashmir, was attacked by a suicide bomber killing 40 members of the Indian Central Reserve Police Force. The attack was claimed by militants operating from Pakistan who had been instrumental in a series of audacious terrorist acts on Indian security forces since 2016. The Pulwama incident was followed on February 26 by a coordinated strike by the Indian Airforce on a militant base in Balakot across the Line of Control (BBC, February 26, 2019b). Next day, in a fire fight between the Indian and Pakistani air forces, the latter lost a jet while the former's pilot ejected into Pakistani territory. For a while it seemed that the simmering conflict between the nuclear-armed neighbours would escalate into a full-scale war (BBC, February 27, 2019c).

The BJP-led NDA national government, which had suffered serious reversals in the state elections in December 2018, and was facing the prospects of a defeat in the *Lok Sabha* elections in May 2019 (Safi 2018), wasted no effort in fanning the flames of jingoistic nationalism. In retrospect, the Pulwama attack might well become a major landmark in India's post-1947 development. The incident itself was highly symbolic of the BJP's governance in the last five years; it may well be a portent of the things to come.

Under the BJP, the efforts to project India's power abroad have been accompanied by a new national narrative at home. These changes are reflected in three related areas: the attempts to redefine the public space, policies on religious minorities, and the control of state institutions.

The Hindu nationalist project as conceived by its founders in the 1920s aims to create a Hindu state in which there is a congruence between the main cultural force in Indian society and political power (Jaffrelot 1996). Since the 1980s, this objective has become sublimated in policies aimed at building a temple to Ram in place of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, abrogating article 370 of the constitution which gives special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and the creation of a uniform civil code that would repeal Muslim Personal Law. Whereas previous BJP-led NDA governments have preferred to put these policies on the backburner, in preference to the promotion of cultural nationalism (Adeney and Sáez 2005), under Modi there has been a distinct shift to redefining the public sphere in the language of Hindu nationalism. In contradistinction to Nehruvian secularism, the icon of the contemporary BJP is Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, whose Statute of Unity was inaugurated by Modi in October 2018. The statute symbolises the yearning for power, strength and national unity. These norms have been taken further by the Modi government by seeking to control dissent.

Feminists, radicals, writers, intellectuals, social activists, and human rights campaigners who have opposed government policies have been marginalised or physically attacked. Directly or indirectly, the government has used its influence in the media, particularly the burgeoning digital media, to unleash a tidal wave of sectarian Hindu nationalism as the official state ideology in which opponents are regularly labelled as anti-national. Sedition laws have been used against women, students and political activists. Street activists of the *Sangh parivar* - the family of *Hindutva* organisations that include the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishva Hindu Parshad (VHP), Bajrang Dal (BD), Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), and a large assortment of vigilante groups - have been regularly employed to discipline opponents, often resulting in physical confrontations or death. As the *2019 World Press Freedom Index* notes:

> Those who espouse Hindutva, the ideology that gave rise to Hindu nationalism, are trying to purge all manifestations of "anti-national" thought from the national debate. The coordinated hate campaigns waged on social networks against journalists who dare to speak or write about subjects that aggravate Hindutva followers are alarming and include calls for the journalists concerned to be murdered (Reporter with Borders 2018).

Concerted efforts have also been made to redefine citizenship by restricting the right to Indian citizenship to migrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh to non-Muslims only. A bill proposing this change failed only because the BJP was unable to secure a majority in the upper house (BBC, February 13, 2019a). State institutions, too, have been used to foster crude jingoism. In 2014, the annual address of the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, was broadcast live on the nation tv network Doordarshan; and in October 2016, the University Grant's Committee in an official circular asked affiliated universities and colleges to take a security pledge on the birth anniversary of Patel to commit themselves to "preserved the unity, integrity and security of the nation" in presence of freedom fighter who would speak about nationalism. (*The Tribune*, October 21, 2016). This initiative came

simultaneously with the government's attempt to make it compulsory to play the national anthem in every cinema before a film is screened; and though this decision was overturned by the Supreme Court, it created an atmosphere of collective vigilantism against cinema goers who did not follow the ruling.

In seeking to redefine the public sphere as a non-secular space of majoritarian nationalism, the BJP and its ideologues argue that they are acting within the spirit of the constitution. So far, the initiatives taken by the government to dilute article 370, Muslim Personal Law, and build a temple Ram on the site of the Babri Masjid, are clearly *within* the framework of the constitution but the policy outcomes which are being sought conform distinctively to the *Hindutva* agenda. Even the most cardinal feature of the constitution, its state secularism, in the logical of Hindu nationalism, is being redefined from being "pseudo-secular" (catering for religious minorities) to "genuine secularism" (reflecting the will of the majority). Gradually, but ineluctably a new *Hindutva* republic is emerging in which there are no profound constitutional changes but where "political processes" have "already begun to change" (*The Times of India,* July 27, 2014).

The principal antagonistic "other" of Hindu nationalism have been the religious minorities – Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and Zoroastrians – against whom the ideology of an ethnised nation has been constructed. Traditionally, in making a distinction between religious minorities (Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs), for whom India is a "holyland" and a "fatherland," and others (Christians and Muslims), Hindu nationalists have sought to "assimilate the former within the broader pantheon of Hinduism and politically and socially exclude the latter as alien to India" (Kim 2017, 358). This strategy has been applied with vigour in the BJP government's policies towards minorities since 2014. Funding for

minority development programmes has been significantly curtailed; policy initiatives undertaken by the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to enhance equality and equity, especially for Muslims, in service delivery have been dropped; socio-economically disadvantaged Christian and Muslim communities have been deliberately excluded from affirmative action while such provision has been extended to include “poor” upper castes; and measures have been taken to restore the legislative protection for scheduled castes and tribes against violence – in contrast to the denial of any equivalent protection to religious minorities, especially Muslims (Ibid; Kim 2019, 193). And these policies have been pursued in an atmosphere of hostility, often emanating from the government itself. The Minster of Minority Affairs openly declared that “the Muslims are not a minority” (*The Times of India*, May 28, 2014a) and that the community’s concerns about security arose largely from a “fear psychosis” (Hebbar 2014) that had gripped India’s Muslims. Similarly, the Secretary of the BJP’S Scheduled Caste Cell urged poor Christians and Muslims to “convert back to Hinduism” (Singh 2016) if the wanted the benefits of reservations.

A far more debilitating impact on India’s religious minorities, particularly Muslims, has resulted from the campaigns orchestrated by the BJP’s mass organisations. *Love Jihad* (Strohl 2018) was launched in Uttar Pradesh before the 2014 general elections and captured the national imagination as a struggle against sexually rapacious Muslim youth converting Hindu women to Islam through false declarations of love. Orchestrated by Yogi Adityanath, who subsequently became the state’s Chief Minister in 2017 in a clean sweep of the state’s elections, the campaign demonised inter-religious marriages, framing them as an affront to traditional notions of patriarchy, family and the community. *Ghar wapsi* (return home/religious reconversion) emerged soon after the election of the BJP government to

reconvert Christians and Muslims to Hinduism, often with inducements such as ration cards for access to state goods (Kim 2017, 363). It quickly spiralled into a debate about the need for national anti-conversion legislation to reinforce the highly restrictive freedom of religion legislation passed by many BJP state governments. Similarly, soon after the elections, the *gau raksha* (cow protection) to prohibit the laughter of cows and processing of associated products also gripped the media's attention. Vigilante groups became active in seeking to impose a cow slaughter ban, leading to many cases of public lynching of cow traders and those dealing with meat products. In attempting to assuage the growing popular influence of *gau raksha* campaigners, the government enacted the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Market) Rules, 2017, which banned the "sale and purchase of cattle, including cows and buffalos, for slaughter at live stock markets" (Ibid, 362) - a regulation which the critics of the government claimed was an underhand manoeuvre to impose national cow slaughter ban.

These campaigns were often accompanied by increasing levels of violence against religious minorities where the BJP faced state elections – Delhi, Haryana, UP. Incidence of communal violence and attendant deaths increased annually since 2014 in both BJP and non-BJP governed states, though there are some indications that in the latter, before elections, BJP activists had an incentive to foment communal violence (Kronstadt 2018). As the Human Rights Watch (2018) report on India noted, "Vigilante violence aimed at religious minorities, marginalised communities, and critics of the government – often carried out by groups claiming to support the ruling BJP – became an increasing threat in India in 2017." But perhaps the major site of anti-minority violence was Kashmir where the government's hard-line policy instigated the current insurgency and the series of events which led to the Pulwama incident (UNHCHR 2018).

Furthermore, despite formidable opposition the BJP government has begun to erode the architecture of minority and special regional rights embodied in the constitution. An attempt has been made to amend Muslim Personal Law with prohibition of *triple talaq*; and the Law Commission was instructed to review the proposal for a Uniform Civil Code as part of its wider consultations of changes to minority personal law. Article 35A of the Constitution, which gives the residents of Kashmir special protection in terms of government employment, service delivery and land procurement, is currently under review in the Supreme Court. Minority institutions – religious organisations, trusts, educational establishments – have increasingly become the subject of control, infiltration and new regulations. Religious minorities in India today, as the US Commission on Religious Freedom (2018) concludes in its *Annual Report 2018*, "face challenges ranging from acts of violence or intimidation, to loss of political power, to increasing feeling of disenfranchisement and 'otherness.'" These findings were echoed by Amnesty International, which in a wide-ranging report on human rights, religious freedom, freedom and government inaction, summarised that:

> Religious minority groups, particularly Muslims, faced increasing demonization by hard-line Hindu groups, pro-government media and some state officials…Authorities were openly critical of human rights defenders and organizations, contributing to a climate of hostility against them. Mob violence intensified, including by vigilante cow protection groups. Press freedom and free speech in universities came under attack. India failed to respect its human rights commitments made before the UN Human Rights Council. The Supreme Court and High Courts delivered several progressive judgments, but some rulings undermined human rights. Impunity for human rights abuses persisted (2018, 189).

The indifference of the government to such transgressions led Ganguly (2015) to suggest that "it may well be seeking to usher in a new social order – one that privileges India's dominant Hindu community over everyone else."

At the core the BJP's transformational project is a desire to remould state institutions in the image of Hindu nationalism. Government funded schemes have been renamed in celebration of Hindutva icons; education policy, notably at the state level in BJP governed states, has been used to revise the curricula, textbooks and extra-curricular activities to inculcate a sense of Hindu nationalist pride; and state ceremonial functions have been saturated with Hindu icons and language to undermine, if not erase, any pretence of representation of a plural, secular polity. Although the BJP has been thwarted from fully *Hindutvising* the state and the constitution by the absence of a majority in the upper house and an overwhelming majority in the lower house of parliament, this has not frustrated its efforts to use executive power to subvert or control the independent institutions of the state. The Supreme Court, for instance, witnessed an unprecedented struggle between the Chief Justice of India, who was alleged to be doing the government's bidding and four court judges over the allocation of political sensitive cases which it was alleged the Chief Justice was withholding from his colleagues (Vanaik 2018). The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which had been used to investigate and harass political opponents, became politicised to such an extent that its two leading officers fought an open contest against each other in the courts (Bhardwaj 2018). The Election Commission, a body noted for its independence, was leaned upon to delay the calling of state elections in Gujarat, used to hurriedly disqualify Aam Aadmi Party Members of the Legislative Assembly for holding offices for profit, and justify the creation of election bonds as a source of funding for political parties (Varma 2018). Similarly, the independence and the regulatory functions of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) have been systematically undermined, not least in the pursuit of erratic polices such as demonetisations and the use of the RBI's reserves to bolster the government's own balance sheet. The Central Vigilance Commission, which oversees the CBI and central administration, was headed by a BJP loyalist with accusations of involvement in high profile

corruption cases himself (Ibid.). University governing bodies and other academic institutions, traditionally the bastions of dissent and radicalism, including Jawaharlal Nehru University(JNU), have been packed with BJP/RSS ideologues with a clear objective to reshape the objectives of institutions of higher education within the framework of the government's values (Gudavarthy 2018, 27-32).

These efforts to control independent state institutions that play a vital role in upholding impartiality reflect a desire to limit, if not erase, autonomous institutions and spaces. If in the past the appeal of Hindu nationalism was rooted primarily in the sphere of culture, since 2014 the BJP has ensured that in constructing a polity in its own image, the power of the state is fully utilised to both consolidate the process and marginalise its opponents. Thus, in making a broader sense of this development, of Hindu nationalism in power, instead of focusing on the gap between the party's manifesto and its achievements, a more relevant exercise is to offer interpretative analyses of how the experience can be better understood. It is to these competing explanations that we now turn.

Authoritarian populism

Comparatively, the rise of the BJP and Modi share many of characteristics common to the success of populist leaders and parties in the United States, Europe, Latin America and East Asia. The new style and rhetoric with its emphasis on development, the corrupt ruling establishment, and the charismatic Modi who had "transformed" Gujarat, were all redolent of the populist wave (Chacko 2018). Populism according Norris and Inglehart is distinguished by two qualities: a rhetoric of opposition to established ideas, institutions and values which challenge legitimate authority, "disrupting mainstream 'politics as usual', and populist

"leaders claim that only legitimate source of political and moral authority rests with the 'people"' (2019, 4-5) - the authentic, genuine and ultimate repositories of the collective will. Historically, populists have emerged both from within the ideologies of the Left and the Right, but the term authoritarian populism was coined by the sociologist Stuart Hall (1985) to describe the politics of Thatcherism in the 1980s Britain to highlight the contradiction between the common people and the state as justification for policies against racialised and radical "other" minorities. As Norris and Inglehart (Ibid.,8) point out, populist rhetoric, more of often than not, is combined with authoritarian values – in the name of the family, community and nation – with group conformity and obedience to a strong leader to produce policies that target the threatening "others" (migrants, alleged terrorists, non-conformists, and political opponents).

Populism as a political phenomenon is not alien to India. Mrs Indira Gandhi's leftward turn in 1971 (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987, 135-148) under the slogan *garibi hatao* (eradicate poverty), which ended in the Emergency, was the first national experiment in non-institutionalised politics. At the regional level (Wyatt 2013), state leaders have emerged who turned populism into an art form. The current brand of authoritarian populism, however, has its origins in Gujarat in the 1980s and 1990s where, as Desai (2011) notes, the caste and caste structure of the state combined with rapid capitalist development to produce new propertied groups under *Hindutva*, even though this dispensation now rests on extreme social polarisation. Writing in 2011, Desai inferred that "Gujarat could well be the image of India's future" (Ibid., 354).

Since 2014, many of the BJP-led NDA's policies – anti-immigration, anti-minorities, cow protection, anti-corruption crusade, surgical strikes (2016 and 2019) against terrorist bases in Pakistan, and the official promotion of jingoistic nationalism – and executive practices, that include extreme centralisation of power in the Prime Minister, suggest that authoritarian populism is an appropriate epithet for the administration. However, there are three distinct limitations in using this perspective. First, each authoritarian populism is in a sense *sui generis*, constrained and limited by the structure of governance. If India's majoritarian political systems makes it easy prey for a dominant ideological party, then the country's regional and social diversity also militates heavily against political coalitions being able to provide stability to such a regime. Second, as a catch-all the concept reflects poorly on the highly virulent form of nationalism advocated by the proponents of *Hindutva*, some of it with potentially genocidal tendencies. Again, to paraphrase Desai, if in the last decade Gujarat were the image of India's future, then that future is being planned and perfected today with possibly devastating consequences. Third, the nature of governance in Delhi and within the states is rapidly evolving today. New information and social media technologies provide those in administration, as the implementation of *aadhaar* card scheme has demonstrated,[ii] with expanded spheres of political and social control to manage security and the distribution of collective social goods. Authoritarian populism thus fails to fully reflect the hardening of political control because these technologies and their use – and misuse – is suggestive of a more directly managed polity; and such direct control is more commonly associated with totalitarian states than a democracy suffering from a temporary aberration from well-established liberal norms.

The Indian ideology

Another perspective on the rise of the BJP and its government can be clustered around what Anderson has called the Indian ideology, a "discourse that fatally generates euphemisms and embellishments" (2013, 3) about the nature of India's republic. This ideology is deeply embedded in modern Indian history and political science. Being largely a-historical, it rests on a binary distinction between secular and Hindu nationalism, ignoring the causes and consequences of the Partition (Talbot and Singh 2008). Whereas the Congress is portrayed as the harbinger of secular, inclusive and civilizational nationalism, Hindu nationalism is labelled as exclusive, majoritarian and a modern derivative ethno-national construct (see Varshney 2002, ch.3). In operationalising this distinction, the rise of the BJP is frequently attributed to proximate factors: the decay of the Congress party; its inability to deliver development; the agitational strategies of the Hindu nationalists; and Modi's charismatic appeal, especially to the young electorate. Thus, following the 2014 elections, Varshney (2014) argued that Hindu nationalism's revolutionary impulses would be constrained because they would damage the party's programme of economic development, face opposition from coalition allies, and be invalidated by the constitution. A similar argument was made by Wright for whom the rise of an ideologically centre-of-right party nationally offers an opportunity to create a "new zone of consensus" which can be extended to "incorporate the right wing, as the left wing was incorporated much earlier in Kerala and West Bengal" (2014, 6). In both case it was suggested that India's democracy and constitution would act as moderating influence on Hindu nationalism.

Chacko and Mayer (2014), though more critical than Varshney or Wright, have posed the issue somewhat differently. For them, the BJP's success in the 2014 elections and its

ability to impose its transformative project, needed to fulfil two conditions: to push through an ideologically distinctive programme that serves the interests of its core constituency and, quoting Weatherford, convert "the votes that delivered victory to the party from a tenuous to a contingent social coalition united by rejection of the incumbent, to a support base that has substantial reasons for investing their loyalty in the party" (2002, 526). Hence, though the BJP came to power on a wave of anti-corruption and the promise of development, to become the new ruling dispensation it had to consolidate its governing formula through a distinctive ideology – development or Hindu nationalism, or a combination of both – that appeal to a wider social base than hitherto.

However, these analyses of the BJP in power have struggled to provide a reasonable account of the government's policies and actions in the last five years. The BJP has been able to implement most of its policies *within* the framework of the constitution which is not a clear or unambiguous document. It is, as the BJP in power has demonstrated over Article 35A, Muslim Personal Law reform, and article 356 and cow protection, susceptible to a *Hindutva* reading. Equally, the political and economic factors that might have tempered the more belligerent policies have proved ineffective with neither the NDA's coalition partners, nor considerations of economic policy, being a constraint on hostility towards religious minorities. Clearly, a form of consolidation of the *Hindutva* constituency has taken place as a result of the government's policies, and might be further reinforced by the outcome of the *Lok Sabha* elections. If this is, indeed the case, the outcome has been delivered by de-institutionalisation and cultural mobilisation rather than by working through the formal structures of governance alone.

The principal problem with explanations framed within the Indian ideology is that they overlook the historical modularity between the Congress and Hindu nationalism (Singh 2000), a modularity that enabled the Congress to encapsulate the latter and marginalise its more extreme variants – for example the RSS and Jana Sangh- as an anathema to its official secularism. It was because of this modularity that the Congress could be a secular, developmental organisation but also as a party which under Mrs Gandhi persecuted minorities. This long-term ideological comprise, with many shades of soft *Hindutva* nestling in the party, have frustrated its efforts to be the rightful guardian of India's religious minorities. Hence, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (2004-14), despite being committed to a radical programme of equal opportunities for religious, with the specific target of eradicating persistent socio-economic backwardness among the country's Muslims minorities, quickly retreated from its programme, not least because of imbedded opposition within its own ranks (Kim 2019, ch.3),. Historically, a Congress-led coalition of secular parties has struggled to reverse many of the measures implemented by the BJP in office, notably that appeal to the cultural chauvinism of the majority (Sáez and Singh 2012). If anything, in office the BJP has succeeded in shifting the ideological centre of Indian politics permanently to the right, and other parties, like the Congress, have by perforce had to tip-toe on it. In the short run this may well be a tactical necessity; in the long run however it is unlikely to deliver a strategic dividend.

Ethnic consolidation

In contrast to the pervasiveness of the Indian ideology in mainstream political science and history, a radically different set of explanations focus on understanding the political processes of ethnic consolidation. These explanations draw on democratic and institutional theory to

problematise the nature of the Partition settlement and how it perpetuates an inbuilt bias towards Hindu majoritarianism. Here the emergence of the BJP as the party of government is not conjectural but the product of long-term structural processes.

For these scholars (Singh 2000, ch.3), Indian democracy does not conform to a secularised majoritarianism in which the state (e.g. USA) encourages acculturalisation and assimilation but allows ethnic groups to maintain ethnicity in the private sphere. Nor does it resemble consociationalism, in which ethnicity and individual rights are recognised as the basis for the organisation of the state (e.g. Belgium) that acts as an arbiter between ethnic groups. Instead India appears to conform to a third variant; namely, "ethnic democracy". As Smooha maintains, ethnic democracies combine the "extension of political and civil rights to individuals and certain collective rights to minorities with institutionalised dominance over the state by one of the ethnic groups" (1990, 391) In some ethnic democracies (e.g. Israel) the process of institutionalisation of dominance is formal, while in other (e.g. India) it is implicit. In India this arises from the unspoken assumptions of state secularism, the existence of Hindu majoritarianism, and the historic ascendency of the Congress in shaping the state in its own image. Although religious minorities have been granted individual and collective rights, the recognition of these rights has been based on a tactical accommodation with hegemonic Hinduism. According to Singh (2000, 47-50), within India's framework of ethnic democracy, religious minorities have been subject to hegemonic and violent control, especially in the peripheral regions (Kashmir, Punjab, the North-east) where religious minorities constitute the majority of the population. Where religious and ethnic groups have disputed the nature of hegemonic control, the Indian state has used the ideological, economic and political resources at its disposal to make such contests "unthinkable" and used coercive

practices to render them "unworkable" (Ibid., 47). In sum, the experience of India's religious and ethnic minorities is not one of equality in a secular, plural democracy.

Whereas the proponents of "ethnic democracy" highlight the structures and experience of Indian democracy since 1947, for institutionalists (Kim 2019) historical institutionalism and path dependence provide a more fruitful point of departure in understanding state policies towards religious minorities. This concept holds that institutions created during "critical junctures" – major turning points in history – can have long-term outcomes which are difficult to reverse because they create "increasing returns" to constituencies that support them (Peters 2005). India's period of constitution-making was one such critical juncture. Acknowledging the precepts of high modernity in fashioning a secular state, this period also created an uneven playing field between the Hindu majority and India's religious minorities by seriously curtailing the political claims minorities could make in the name of their religious identity. It also restricted major affirmative action provisions solely to disadvantaged Hindu lower castes (Kim 2019, 39-45). While the modularity between the ideology of the secular state and majority Hindu national sentiment politically disarmed religious minorities, the restriction of affirmative action to only disadvantaged Hindu lower caste groups profoundly impacted on the development of Indian democracy. In the long-term, the exclusion of Christians and Muslims from these provisions has created an enduring social divide. In short, the historical institutionalist approach draws attention to how the framing of religion by India's constitution-makers did not so much as erase the claims of religion in public life as institutionalised the enduring disadvantage of religious minorities.

The concepts of an “ethnic democracy” and historical institutionalism and path dependence have some merit in explaining the rise of the BJP and its performance in government. They highlight the pervasive bias in public policy against religious minorities since 1947. They also provide an invaluable framework for situating the BJP’s policies on Kashmir, citizenship, religious minorities, and the efforts to build a Hindu state, though analyst disagree on whether an “ethnic democracy” is being *crafted* or *consolidated* (Jaffrelot 2017; Singh 2000). Similarly, historical institutionalism and path dependence provide a good account of the efforts of the BJP and its family of organisation to broaden its support base to caste groups (Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Schedule Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs)) traditionally viewed as hostile to Hindu nationalism. These policies have included the granting of constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Classes, the restoration of special protection for SCs against violence, and most recently, reservations for poor upper castes (Vanaik 2018). Such initiatives contrast vividly with policy inertia and indifference to the poverty among socio-economically disadvantaged lower castes among Christians and Muslims. This deliberate neglect is perhaps reflective of the maturing of what Anderson has called a “caste-iron” democracy (2013:112).

The application of an ethnic democracy to understand of the rise of the BJP and its policies have been critiqued on several grounds. First, it is said to constructs the idea of a dominant, homogenous Hindu community where one simply does not exist because of the manifold divisions within Hinduism (Adeney 2017). Second, the rights of minorities in India are not nominal but have provided substantive collective and individual relief; and though India might meet most of the conditions necessary for the establishment of an ethnic democracy, its *de jure* transformation remains still quite problematic because of the political threshold necessary to revise the constitution.

Similarly, historical institutionalism and path dependence as a framework for understanding the predicament of India's religious minorities can be criticised for being too general and indiscriminate. Across India the sociological development of religious minorities varies enormously between communities and regions, so that framing it in a straight-jacket of path dependence seems highly problematic. Although public policies on Muslims at the national level, notably under the BJP, might provide strong confirmatory evidence of a policy lock that is irreversible, this is evidently not the case in the southern states (Fazael 2010) where Muslims have been included in reservations before and after Independence. There are, moreover, serious conceptual and empirical difficulties with historical institutionalism and path dependence – the nature of "critical junctures", change between such junctures, and the idea of "increasing returns" over time (Mahoney 2000) - which do not lend themselves readily to the operationalisation of the approach in India.

Marxist approaches

Inevitably, the most trenchant critiques of the BJP government have come from Marxists. Historically, India has a rich radical tradition associated with the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)), and the many of the *groupuscules* of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI (ML)). Whereas the first two have eschewed direct action since early Independence, the latter (Sundar 2019) continue to wage an insurgency against the Indian state. In central-eastern parts of the country, large swathes are affected by a Maoist uprising which the security forces have struggled to contain. As well as political Marxism, Western Marxism continues to offer a timely appraisal of developments in India, including of the country's diverse and incoherent communist movement itself.

Central to Marxist analysis are the contradictions between the economy managed by the state and the social formations. It is impossible to do justice to the debates among Marxist on the nature of these contradictions and the political implications that arise from them. Here we reflect on some of the core analysis and the politics of the Left in India.

Naturally, for Marxists the starting point is the economic policies of the government since 2014 that have accentuated the drive towards a neo-liberal economy. They include the deliberate degradation of agriculture through the reduction in subsides, declining procurement prices and rising chronic indebtedness; systematic reduction in rural anti-poverty programmes for the landless; removal of protection rights for organised labour; the creation of new Special Economic Zones; further liberalisation of areas of inward investment; new legislation for the acquisition of agricultural land for infrastructural and industrial development; use of the financial system to support the country's major corporations; and the promotion of "crony capitalism" in nurturing a close relationship between some leading corporations and the administration (Chacko 2018). When set alongside the political developments outlined above, these measures have led some to question whether the BJP government should be seen as marking the onset of fascism or reflects a version of authoritarianism. For S. Banaji, what we are witnessing is an "indigenised version of fascism" with its "fetishisation of Muslims as a worthy enemy" and subversion of "democratic processes under the guise of democracy" (2018, 45). This view is supported by J. Banaji (2016), who maintains that there are remarkable similarities -an ideological base, social mobilisation, the complicity of state authorities in accommodating the Hindu Right, and the use of "stormtroopers" to discipline opponents - between the rise of fascism in 1930s Germany and India today. But such a reading was not shared by the former general sectary of the CPI (M). For him conditions under the BJP government did not meet the classical

definition of fascism by Marxist; namely, an "open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital" (Karat 2016). Rather, it was not "fascist" but "authoritarian", a characterisation that enabled the CPI (M) to maintain its parliamentary strategy.

Marxist accounts also highlight the changing nature of the state under the BJP. Although there are subtle differences on the extent to which the government's policies represent accommodation with the global neo-liberal agenda, there is a consensus that a new developmental state is emerging, one in line with the East Asian model in which authoritarianism is combined with capitalist-state led development. This model is identified with Modi's tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat when he followed policies that "promised private sector driven growth, high economic growth rates, business friendly policies, foreign investment, urbanisation and industrial development" (Chacko 2018, 554). But the outcome of these policies – in Gujarat and India since 2014 – has been to produce extreme social polarisation, unbalanced development, and authoritarian governance that has sought to emasculate democratic opposition. Hyper nationalism is one response to bridging the gap between policies and the reality.

For other Marxists, though the government's economic policies are important, the performance of the BJP government should be viewed through the lens of Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Vanaik (2018), operating substantially within the framework of the Indian ideology, makes a sharp distinction between India's two hegemonies: that of the Congress and the BJP. The emergence of the BJP as a hegemonic force has been part of the *longue durée* characterised by the decline of the Congress, failure of its economic development, the

BJP’s efforts to extend its social base among new social classes and castes, and a slow but perceptible change in social values of India’s middle class towards religious conservatism. The BJP’s actions in office, especially in the use of state power to promote Hindu cultural chauvinism, is symptomatic of a process to consolidate a new vision of neo-liberal vision of India. As Vanaik concludes, the new “hegemony of the BJP represents a qualitative hardening of Indian political culture. A decisive defeat of this powerful far-right bloc, so deeply engrained in the pores of Indian society, will require a major shift in the socio-political relationship of forces” (2018, 59).

Apart from the general concerns of applying Marxist approaches, there are three specific issues in their understanding of BJP-led NDA government. First, economic liberalisations began in the early 1980s. While the rise of the BJP was coterminous with this liberalisation, it is difficult to identify as its primary cause. In fact, Congress governments, despite their social welfare programmes, have continued the process of economic liberalisation. Second, it is doubtful whether a concept such as fascism is historically applicable to India, even though there are family similarities. The genealogy of *Hindutva* is contemporaneous with the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, but the historical specificity of the ideology was entirely different (Jaffrelot 1999). And third, though Marxist accounts capture well the process of transition in development that is taking place in India, the end point of this process (e.g. a *Hindutva* developmental state) remains largely unclear. The question is whether the BJP and *Hindutva* are a by-product of a transitional regime - that aims to fully integrate the Indian economy into the world capitalist system - or its principal driver. This is no small matter.

Towards an alternative approach?

Given the significant shortcomings of the approaches outlined above, there is a need to move beyond them to develop a more satisfactory method for analysing Hindu nationalism in power. Authoritarian populism reflects the incoherence, anti-liberalism, and the wider appeal of the BJP and its leadership, but the general sociological changes that underpin the rise of the *Hindutva* ideology are given insufficient recognition. Among these changes (see Gudavarthy 2018) are the long-term consequences of economic liberalisation since the early 1980s; the pervasive sense of anomie among propertied and subaltern groups alike; the increasingly fragmented social identities of caste, gender, social class and religion that have created new alignments challenging traditional stereotypes; the emergence of a powerful globalised, middle class that reflects the anxieties and ambitions of *Hindutva*; and, above all, the impact of the digital revolution on social change as well as political and every day communications in creating new narratives of Indian politics both at the national and regional levels. Taken together they may well be the evidence of the emergence of a mass society that some analyst predicted almost three decades ago (Jeffrey 1986). However, whereas in Europe in some countries mass societies at the end of the nineteenth centuries presaged the rise of fascism, in India today the process appears to be much more variegated, diffuse and unpredictable.

It is also a moot point whether the emergence of *Hindutva* as the new hegemonic ideology that is displacing Nehruvian secularism is a form of cultural subalternalism (Gudavarthy 2018, xxiii). This subalternity might well be spearheading a cultural democratisation from below led by Modi himself who, as a member of the OBCs, is only too keen to exploit his anti-establishment credentials. But if the process is being consciously

engineered by the BJP, RSS and its family of organisations dominated by the upper castes, its popular appeal can only be understood as the final alignment of state power with the main cultural force in Indian society: Hinduism . Under the Congress governments this embrace was always partial; under the BJP it now become the *raison d'être* of the state.

Any alternative approach needs to keep three considerations in mind. First, as institutionalists have insisted, history and continuity must be placed at the centre of such analysis. The rise of the BJP to a party of government, for instance, was not some dramatic event propelled by the collapse of Congress or the charisma of Modi: it was predicated on institutional and ideological structures of post-partition India in which the Congress willingly accommodated a soft version of *Hindutva* within itself. A critical reading of the Congress's post-Independence history illustrates the extent to which the party was both unwilling to address the uncomfortable questions about economic development but also the lengths to which it went to promote Hinduism as the country's civic religion (Anderson 2013). Congress crafted the constitution though in doing so it created the institutional structures for its own demise.

Second, any approach must integrate the immense social changes noted above. In most explanations, these changes are often seen as the symptoms of the rise of *Hindutva* than its cause. A clear distinction needs to be made between the policies and the economic and social processes that underpin them. The BJP-led NDA government after 2014, for example, followed centralising and authoritarian policies, but this impulse was reinforced by new digital technologies of social and economic control where meta-data was used to control, discipline, regulated and punish recalcitrant social groups in the name of more effective

service delivery. In age of disciplined, digital capitalism and the meta-data state, the totalitarian temptation – as China's new Social Credit programme illustrates - is never too far away. The key issue is whether the moves in this direction in India are being consciously planned or a simply the results of an incremental fusion between a radical ideology and new technologies.

Finally, some of these concerns can be better addressed by borrowing from social constructionism, an approach that focuses on the "the creation of social knowledge and reality through interaction" in which "social constructionism serves as a mode of explanation to indicate and measure ideational change" (Ogden 2012, 23). From this perspective, the BJP and other agents of *Hindutva* are enjoined in a conscious construction of new political and social identities in which state power is the handmaiden. However, this process began with the first BJP-led NDA government (1998-2004) – not 2014 - when these identities "were assertively established, entrenched and, in effect, mainstreamed into the topography of contemporary politics" (Ibid., 35). Indeed, this mainstreaming explains perhaps how these identities were so effectively mobilised and why they put up such firm resistance to the UPA's programme to reform policies for religious minorities (Kim 2019, chs.2, 3). Social constructionism, moreover, with its transhistorical emphasis has analytical synergies with historical institutionalism (Mahoney 2000) which privileges the importance of long-term impact of embedded institutions and processes through the concept of path-dependence.

Conclusion

The hyper-nationalist campaign conducted by the BJP and its allies since the Palwama incident failed to convert into a landslide victory in the *Lok Sabha* elections held between 11th

April and 19th May 2019. Palwama enabled the BJP to arrest the decline in its support, which in the autumn of 2018 had seemed terminal, but it did not provide a defining victory. In the event, the BJP secured xxx seats (down from xxx in 2014) and xx percentage of the vote polled (down xx from 2014). In addition, the party's regional allies have secured xxx seats and xx percentage of the vote polled, a total which should enable the NDA to secure another five years in office. However, the BJP has suffered significant reversal in Uttar Pradesh, its bastion and ruled by its most hard-line regional leader. In the South, it and its allies have been virtually wiped out. The party's representation is now concentrated in the West, the Hindi-belt and the North-east.

Although the BJP has returned to power with a reduced majority, this is unlikely to dampen its ideological fervour because it has perfected the art of managing its regional partners while marginalising them in office. The latter's emboldened status might temper this outlook, but given the previous experience of such allies, this outcome seems highly improbable. Interestingly, whether in Gujarat or New Delhi, Modi has never lost an election. He and the BJP are unlikely to relinquish power without a struggle.

Even if the new BJP-led NDA's term in office is short-lived, the main political beneficiary from this outcome is likely to be the BJP itself. The Congress and its regional allies, as the experience of the UPA demonstrated, have struggled to *de-Hindutvise* the state. Ironically, a weak, unstable coalition led by the Congress, or other Opposition parties, might create the ideal conditions for the return of Modi as a strongman who can bring back order and stability. Out of the chaos of its own creation, Hindu nationalism has the potential for the long-term coronation of a strongman who, unbridled by constitutional checks, delivers the

social and economic transformation that has so eluded India since independence. In so doing, he would also mark the terminal decline of India's democracy that analysts suggest is not unrelated to extended periods of authoritarian governance (Levitsky and Ziblat 2018).

Lastly, as the analyses have indicated we are undoubtedly witnessing a major change in Indian politics. It is not unlike what some institutionalists call a "critical juncture" (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 110-111) in which conventional political certainties are being recast in radical ways for the long-term. Remarkably, all the approaches discussed recognise that this change is on-going as well as being irreversible. Such unanimity, therefore, calls for new mode of analysis, a framework that provides how the embrace of state power has changed and is changing Hindu nationalism today.

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[i] Apart from creating a hostile environment for dissent, the government has increased practical difficulties for researcher, particularly non-Indian researchers in further limiting access to research visas, monitoring international conferences, and filling institutions of higher education with its own nominees with the aim of *saffronising* higher education (see Gudavarthy 2018, 33-43).

[ii] The *aadhaar* card scheme was launched by the UPA government in order to improve service delivery of state goods to socio-economically disadvantage groups. However, in 2016 the BJP significantly extended the scope of the scheme to make it the largest identification scheme in the world, requiring the *aadhaar* card to be mandatory in almost all routine transactions such banking and the use of mobile phones. Although these measures have been contested in the Supreme Court, in September 2018 the court upheld the validity of the

scheme. The meta-data generated by the *aadhaar* card is being frequently misused by the state, commercial and political groups, see The *Tribune*, April 20, 2019.