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

Dhinakaran Savariyar
Boston College, savariya@bc.edu

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***Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy.* Christophe Jaffrelot. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021, paper, 656pp., ISBN: 9780691206806.**

Dhinakaran Savariyar
Boston College
savariya@bc.edu

Christophe Jaffrelot's *Modi's India* offers a brilliant map of the democracy's changing face under Modi's regime. The eleven chapters divided into three unequal parts investigate the country's political trajectory, as it has been seen to slide from national populism to ethnic democracy which prepares the ground for authoritarianism. Jaffrelot has so structured the narrative that in all three phases, the book converges on a single name – Narendra Modi – to tell the tale of a country that rapidly alters its countenance, though for the worse. Hindu nationalism coupled with a populist political style mastered by Modi garnered the mass support to usurp the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) both in 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, the book cautions against a presupposition that Modi captured power by reaping the votes of lower-caste citizens, though it includes a substantial number among them. The 'Modi Magic' was in fact accomplished by marshaling the support of the upper-caste middle class – BJP's core electorate – that deeply resented the rise of the marginalized sections as main beneficiaries of the post-Mandal 'silent revolution.' Modi delivered his masterstroke by turning the upper-caste resentment into votes that ushered him at the helm in both elections. The non-stop rhetoric of his plebeian roots, while giving the lower castes some sense of dignity and self-esteem, has lagged far behind in developing robust redistribution policies to enhance their welfare. Worse still, their mobilization to fight for their rights and assert their identity has been tactfully disintegrated. In total contrast, his pro-elite stance ensured the simultaneous reemergence of upper caste dominance both in parliament and state assemblies (Part I).

The crafting of an ethnic democracy occurs in tandem with national populism. Modi's appeal to the Hindu majority reminding them of their membership in a religious community that is destined to rule over India facilitated the blurring of caste lines, thus signaling the formation of a strong ethnic democracy. Unfortunately, the majoritarian consciousness that Modi awoke was achieved through 'othering' of the religious minorities who, relegated to 'second-class' citizenship, were further victimized by street and online vigilantism. Moral and cultural policing by nonstate actors created parallel power structures and the latter enjoyed as much legitimacy as the official actors who were, in addition, privileged with legality. Above all, Modi as a populist par excellence managed to circumvent the complexity of populism which has to polarize the populace pitting the majority against the minority 'others' on the one hand and unite the whole nation under the pretext of being its true representatives on the other (p. 451). Needless to mention that the Indian ethnic democracy championed by Modi thrives in the conspicuous absence of an adverse international pressure. Also, the weak and ideologically confused opposition parties have partly aided the smooth sailing of the majoritarian agenda spearheaded by the incumbent leader (Part II).

Jaffrelot accentuates authoritarianism as the natural fallout of an ethnic democracy. Modi's leadership, combining the first and second terms, strategically orchestrated a certain 'officialization of marginalization' of minority communities. While the first was replete with

emboldened manifestations of oppression perpetrated against the minorities by non-state actors, the second witnessed the state and its institutions directly targeting them through a whole series of legislative enactments. Authoritarianism thus unleashed presented twofold consequences: first, it victimized the religious minorities; second, it emasculated those very institutions that could only challenge the government's power (p. 457). The counterrevolution of the elites under Modi to check the rise of plebeian groups declares the Indian brand of authoritarianism that not just ensured the former controlling the power again but also resulted in soaring inequalities in socioeconomical terms that the poor get poorer in the country (Part III). In all of what Jaffrelot argues, one cannot overlook the underlying theme - the decimation of constitutional secularity. Much different from the French *Laicite* that calls for a separation of religious and political spheres, the Indian strand officially recognizes all religious communities enjoying the same rights until it was challenged by the emergence of communalism that gave rise to ethnic nationalism in India (pp. 8, 9).

Jaffrelot's treatment prides itself on a careful, exhaustive, and comprehensive research that diligently attends to factors that transformed the country since its inception. As such, what lends credibility to the work is the meticulousity with which any point ever made is referenced or substantiated through the entirety of the book. Moreover, from my humble explorations on the subject, I discover to my amazement that *Modi's India* contains within several well-known individual treatments, all rolled into one. For instance, it integrates well the contents of Lobo, L. (2002). *Globalization, Hindu Nationalism, and Christians in India*. Rawat Publications; it builds critically on Puniyani, R. (2006). *Contours of Hindu Rashtra: Hindutva, Sangh Parivar, and Contemporary Politics*. Kalpaz Publications; it sheds more light on Chaturvedi, S. (2016). *I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*. Juggernaut Publication. And I have not exhausted the list of such examples! Amid critics who resent Jaffrelot's expertise in Indology by taking recourse to the traditional route of 'othering,' I position his work as that of an external observer, who, away and distinct from the parties involved, is observant of the truth, which, on its own, is objective and does not change because of who may speak it. Hence, for aspirants interested in an elaborate, unbiased, and neutral treatment on the subject, this is a ready reference book. But for experts on the subject, this is a veritable intellectual treat – a feat that Jaffrelot has masterfully achieved in *Modi's India*.