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Anatomy of India's New Regime

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India's current regime rests on three interwoven factors: Hindutva, a captured civil society, and an authoritarian state. Together they have produced a decade-long collective suspension of disbelief. The challenge is to contest all three arenas simultaneously & produce a new imagination for India.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the coming of a "New India" in 2017-in his Independence Day speech and his New Year's Eve address that year. After his re-election in 2019, the project of superimposing a new India gathered pace. Since then, it is clear to any observer of Indian politics that a transition is under way-the old order is almost done away with.

> Together, these factors have created an unprecedented condition-a decade-long collective willing suspension of disbelief that has made the new regime feasible.

In the name of attacking Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress Party, and so on, what has been actually happening is a frontal attack on the constitutional republic that came into being in 1950. By invoking ideas of New India, Viksit Bharat, and Hindu nationalism, a new regime has been ushered in. That new regime is now slowly stabilising.

Many would choose to believe that the new regime is still some way off. They would cite the many weaknesses of current power structures to argue that neither a new regime nor a new hegemony has successfully installed itself. However, it would be well to realise that the regime's penchant for repression and violence, its impetuousness, and its irritability are not signs of unsteadiness. They are its organic characteristics.

It is a regime characterised by excitable assertions of power and a crass show of strength. Its opponents are at a loss as to how to counter it. The question of how to tame the current regime must therefore begin with a clear-headed mapping of its core characteristics.

India's new regime obviously relies on many strategies. Its public image and operational identity are characterised by the Modi phenomenon, but its core comprises three interwoven factors -three body parts, so to speak: Hindutva makes for the head, civil society for the arms, and the state for the legs that kick hard. This composition produces many closures, distractions, and the mirage of revenge, greatness, and achievement. Together, these factors have created an unprecedented condition-a decade-long collective willing suspension of disbelief that has made the new regime feasible.

Beyond the Individual Cult

When talking of the present moment and the new order, the Modi factor is discussed the most-for obvious reasons. It has led to the personality cult of a megalomaniac leader. Democracy is known to throw up such leadership from time to time-cravings for "strong leaders" and plebiscitary turns are not unknown to democracies, and India is no exception. Since the death of Indira Gandhi, Indian politics had been devoid of anything like a national hero.

Then, suddenly, in 2014, a claim was made that such a leader had arrived to save the country-a leader who believed he was destined to make history and to be history himself, a leader who could convince large numbers that he could deliver, save, and bring glory.

Such a leader often revels in destabilising pre-existing patterns and norms. For the public at large, he is a magician who can pull rabbits out of a hat-giving credence to slogans such as *Modi hai toh mumkin hai* (With Modi, it's possible). Beyond this ability to conjure an aura of making the impossible possible, Modi's leadership is also associated with demagoguery sustained by a carefully crafted image and state-funded publicity.

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The question is: how long can such a leader sustain his aura? The history of demagogues offers no clear answer. In Modi's case, ever since he roughshod senior leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2013, his popularity has remained almost steady. Despite being in power, it has not exactly grown-yet everything his government does or does not do is endorsed in the context of his leadership and popularity.

Sceptics will always doubt how much of this is manufactured-and indeed, Modi has carefully crafted this popularity. His role, and the media's, in producing a willing suspension of disbelief is undeniable. In many an election, and also during crises such as Covid-19 and the current global shadows of war, the regime has managed to retain its grip on popular perceptions mainly on the strength of Modi's popularity.

And, yet, it might be a mistake to analyse the present moment and the new regime only, or primarily, in the context of Modi the person. The regime was ushered in by Modi, but there is something more problematic and more serious about it than the mere personality cult of the leader. When we talk of Modi, in any case we are talking about a package-more than mere persona. That is why we need to look at the substance of the regime beyond the dramatic and divisive role of one leader.

Hindutva the Overarching Phenomenon

Is it possible, for instance, to imagine Modi without the deeper and long-standing politics of Hindutva? Hindutva is the motif that binds many dots together-Modi, his party, the more slippery "parent body", and, more concretely, the transformation of state and civil society. Of course, Hindutva is a nebulous phenomenon-many things packaged into one. Its conveniently confusing conflation of religion, culture, and nation helps generate diffuse support for its upholders. Public display of religiosity is its performative part. But behind that performative act lies a critical factor: converting the religiosity of lay Hindus into an urge for religious assertion. Another component is the messaging of Hindu religiosity as nationalism. Yet another is the homogenisation of Hindu society by transforming local practices into national expressions of religiosity.

But above all, persuading a large section of Hindu society to feel permanently and retrospectively victimised-and identifying Muslims (of yesterday, today, and tomorrow) as the cause of that victimisation-is the most essential feature of Hindutva. As a result, the project of Hindutva turns into a routine and collective enterprise of suspecting, hating, villainising, attacking, and marginalising Muslims. Take away the Muslim factor and much of the argument and attraction of Hindutva disappears.

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In other words, as I have been arguing for over two decades, the politics of Hindutva-with anti-Muslim sentiment as its most essential part-needs to be understood as majoritarianism. A caveat is in order here. In a society like India, with long and complicated histories of relations between different communities, the project of majoritarianism was always a potent factor.

With the distortions of democracy, such a majoritarian project is bound to remain a major feature of collective mobilisations. No society with the kind of diversity India has could escape such a majoritarian challenge. That challenge existed during the freedom struggle; it existed within the Congress; it lurked for some time after Independence; it pounced on the opportunity to share power in the electoral arena; and it finally gathered steam around 1990, when the democratic project had become battered and weak.

Hindutva is not the product of the Modi phenomenon-the Modi phenomenon is the product of the politics of Hindutva, which gained muscle since the late 1980s. Hindutva is not a devil that emerged overnight. It was a demon always present in our midst. It will not disappear suddenly. It can only be contained.

A democratic society with the kind of plurality India has cannot wish away majoritarian tendencies. The battle against majoritarianism has to be a continuous one, both within and beyond formal politics. Imagining that the demon had been defeated led to a lazy lethargy in the realms of ideas, policy, and practice. We are paying the price of that today.

What distinguishes the Modi moment from the earlier phase of Hindutva is that today Hindutva has captured both the state and civil society, situating itself firmly as the foundation of the new regime.

Takeover of Civil Society

On the surface, it appears strange that Hindutva is not being adequately contested. This is explained by the new shape of civil society-it has become an arm of the regime, driven by its fountainhead: Hindutva.

With the rise of the BJP in 2014, sections of civil society chose to align themselves with the tide. A steady stream of influential figures from the arena of culture and entertainment swiftly moved to support the Hindutva project-not just the ruling party. As early as 2013-14, the media began to acquiesce to the project, whether for commercial or ideological reasons.

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Since then, in every moment of limited challenge faced by the regime, the media-as the most voluble part of civil society-has functioned as its spokesperson. It has silenced criticism, cast doubt on legitimate questions, and manufactured the unprecedented decade-long collective suspension of disbelief.

Equally importantly, the quiet surrender of the corporates ensured that both the personality cult and the ideological venom became acceptable across sections of society. Historically, corporates and the classes with access to material resources have never been progressive or inclusive in the Indian context. It has therefore been easy for them to align with the cultural project of Hindutva. At the same time, these classes have never had adequate autonomy, and they swiftly buckled under the pressures of the determined authoritarianism unleashed by the Modi government. Both developments meant that when the new regime began asserting itself, the corporates had neither the willingness nor the capacity to support autonomous civil societal forces.

Less-than-democratic regimes always produce cowardice among sections of civil society-or at any rate, encourage cowardice and complicity. But, in the process, such regimes also guarantee their own sustenance through the penetration of civil society. Civil society is thus reformulated by the regime and in turn helps the regime to sustain itself.

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One can go into the historical analysis of civil society's fragile democratic commitment and its pseudo-commitment to diversity. But the larger point is that today, elements of the traditional civil society are not in a position to forestall the regime.

At the same time, a gigantic project of reshaping civil society is currently under way. Hindutva organisations are busy occupying the entire societal space. From think tanks to town libraries, from the entertainment industry to literary forums, from art to academia, every nook and corner of the socio-cultural space is being captured by pro-Hindutva organisations-so much so that nothing but Hindutva exists in the space of civil society. This new civil society drowns-if not actually destroys-the somewhat autonomous elements of the older civil society.

It can be argued that many opponents of the regime are also located in the realm of civil society. But they are easily discredited or marginalised. And even when sections of civil society offer resistance, they can be readily handled by the other component of the regime-the repressive state apparatus.

Hydra-headed State Power

The exercise of state power is an essential part of any arrangement of normative and physical power in a society. It is no wonder, then, that electoral victories since 2014 have been used by the BJP to capture and transform state power. Within a decade, the ruling party has not only captured the state apparatus but has also ensured that it will be wielded viciously against any opposition.

The BJP inherited a state that was strong in its formal accessories but weak and chaotic in its operation. The trappings of physical control over citizens were already in place; ideological and extra-constitutional expressions of state power were then added to these.

Several factors have contributed to the making of the contemporary Indian state-one that advertises democratic pretensions but practises less-than-democratic actions. A personality cult often takes shelter in the cosy shadow of repression, born out of the conviction that all opposition is treacherous. Besides, Hindutva requires a large amount of violence-in the metaphorical sense but also in the actual sense. Today's personality cult has thus contributed to the strong assertions of the state. But more than that, the attitude of the Indian state today is predicated on a feeling of revenge and retaliation.

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This development has also been indirectly supported by at least two related processes. First, the previous regime historically failed to evolve a state apparatus that would systematically balance repressive tendencies with constitutional boundaries. Instead, in the name of doing good to the needy, the previous regime allowed the state to become the fulcrum of power as benevolence-something that was easily justified. Once the state is pushed to that pedestal, it is only one step to transform it into a machine that controls citizens-for their own good and for the good of the nation.

Second, ever since the idea of terrorism became a password for compromising democratic processes, the repressive turn of the state apparatus became more prominent. The ruling party has deftly taken advantage of these background processes. The state today constitutes a confluence of the Hegelian idea of wisdom, the 20th century European idea of the strong state as an expression of the strong and exclusionary nation, and the post-Independence Indian idea of the state as the ultimate facilitator of well-being. All repression and every act of high-handedness is seen as emanating from one of these three justifications.

In other words, multiple ideological justifications exist today to defend and legitimise the use of the state apparatus-irrespective of the implications for democracy, at times they are even presented as democratic. Various technologies and legal instruments have colluded to produce a surveillance state, which the regime uses for its own protection. The wherewithal of state repression and surveillance was earlier already being built up. The current regime has made the surveillance state and its repressive behaviour ideologically justifiable and acceptable to many sections of society. There is also an extension of the state through private enforcement agencies. Once state repression is legitimised in the name of the nation, private and localised forms of repression are easily accepted as popular expressions of anger and collective expressions of "state" authority.

What we are witnessing today is therefore not merely a near-unconstitutional state repression as an expression of the nation-state. We also witness layers of force, extortion, and intimidation-a public culture of vigilantism and fear, both protected and permeated by the state.

Taking Up the Challenge

Labelling the new regime may appear to be an academic exercise, but it is necessary because it helps us understand the true significance of our present moment. Globally, the theme of democratic backsliding has captured the imagination of both democracy theorists and democracy practitioners. Sometimes a more nuanced label is adopted-competitive authoritarianism-referring to a reasonably competitive context in which authoritarianism manages to rear its head. On three counts, this label is inadequate, if not outright inapplicable, to the Indian case.

First, the competitive framework is increasingly under a cloud. The asymmetry of access to resources, and to the capabilities for reaching the public through autonomous media, is becoming so stark that it would be a travesty to describe the current political arena in India as competitive. This is compounded by the use of state apparatuses to push competitors to disadvantage.

> We witness the transformation of the idea of nation into the idea of a community-centred national identity, and the state becoming more and more explicitly a Hindutva state in its symbolism and actual operation.

Second, the public-political arena being crafted under the new regime may not qualify as competitive for a deeper reason-the rigging of imagination and the public discourse. We witness the transformation of the idea of nation into the idea of a community-centred national identity, and the state becoming more and more explicitly a Hindutva state in its symbolism and actual operation. This closes the possibility of genuine competition.

Third, the idea of competitive authoritarianism does not adequately capture the cultural and civil societal closures visible in private life and public contestations. The increasing porousness between state authority and private authority, between state regulation and societal regulation, and the imposition of a uniform civic identity as the test of good citizenship all indicate that India may have crossed the threshold of competitive authoritarianism. Among the 'decolonised' supporters of the regime, there is as yet no overt contestation over the desirability of democracy-but a redefinition of democracy itself is under way.

The head, arms, and legs of the regime represent three crucial challenges for the democratic project. Hindutva signals exclusion and dares us to think of new ways of building an inclusionary social imagination. The current espousal of a pseudo-nationalism has led to two distortions: it has put everyone's national loyalty under the scanner and it has torn apart the social fabric. To remedy this situation, we require trust in the national loyalty of citizens and a concerted effort to build bridges across communities and regions.

Secondly, the capture of civil society poses the challenge of shaping critical and autonomous public spaces. We cannot wait for the state to desist from enforcing its normative logic on the civil societal space. Those in academia, and those active in fields of art and culture have to explore spaces of self-expression that are not bound by the formal and informal pressures of the current moment. It is not easy to expect revolutionary assertions by actors from civil society; but they can at least avoid meekly upholding imposed norms. The moment legitimation by civil society gets suspended, the suspension of disbelief will be somewhat contained.

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Finally, the authoritarian state challenges us to revive constitutional morality. While the regime robs citizens of all agency in the name of authority derived from the Constitution, the constitutiional imagination alone can be a platform for imagining and exploring democratic spaces in both private and public spheres. Adherence to constitutional morality by citizens can ensure that the misappropriation of the Constitution as an instrument of the rulers is minimized. Here the onus is on non-BJP parties-they must own up to past misappropriations and wherever in power, they must avoid the temptation to use tactics similar to the BJP.

Together, the challenges of the present moment require the imagination of a new nation-state and the practice of new democratic politics.

Whether democratic forces take up these challenges, connect the three arenas of struggle, and above all produce A new imagination-rather than trying to return to the status quo ante-will determine whether a democratic contest is taken forward or the current regime runs roughshod.

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