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India: From the World's Largest Democracy to an Ethnocracy

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The principle that Hindus can rule and marginalise others has firmly established itself beyond the BJP and the RSS. This emerging ethnocracy in India draws on electoral victories and legislative majorities, making formal suspension of democracy unnecessary.

Soon after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stormed to power in India in May 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took the unprecedented step of celebrating his victory on the banks of the Ganga in the holy city of Varanasi. The city was the parliamentary constituency that elected him, so it was to be expected that he would thank his voters. However, the spectacle of the prime minister, accompanied by senior colleagues who would go on to assume key cabinet portfolios, unapologetically flaunting his Hindu nationalist credentials was a clear break with the past.

To be sure, India's heads of government - even when personally agnostic - have frequented places of worship on key occasions and regularly greeted the country on religious occasions. But Modi's political association with religion as an *inaugural act* was rare. The links were made even more clear when a few weeks further, addressing Parliament for the first time, Modi referred to "1,200 years of servitude" that Indians had suffered. This was a not-so-subtle reference to the presence of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and associated accounts of conquest, plunder, and domination by invaders of the Islamic faith.

> The political and policy practices under Modi exemplify India's transition from a democracy to an ethnocracy […] "where a dominant ethnos gains political control and uses the state apparatus to ethnicise the territory and society."

Modi's early actions offered a glimpse into his future years in office, in which Hindus would come to be considered the core of the Indian nation and religious minorities regarded as threats. The political and policy practices under Modi exemplify India's transition from a democracy to an ethnocracy: defined by the Israeli sociologist Oren Yiftachel as the specific expression of nationalism "where a dominant ethnos gains political control and uses the state apparatus to ethnicise the territory and society in question" (Yiftachel, 2009: 730). Ethnocratic states - such as Israel, Sri Lanka and Malaysia - frame policies that rigidify distinctions between social groups considered the core of the nation and groups considered peripheral and external to the nation. In such regimes, citizenship is unequal and rests on laws that enable the capture of the state by one ethnic group.

In line with Yiftachel's formulation of an ethnocracy, we are witnessing the consolidation of the dominant ethnos, Hindus in this case, as the core of the Indian nation. Alongside, we see the identification of religious minorities as threats, intensifying territorial contests between Hindus and Muslim, a Hindutva ethnonationalism that permeates political discourse, and a widening of a long-standing political-economic gap between Hindus and Muslims.

> Dominant groups in ethnocracies value democracy (at least for themselves) and often take pride in their democratic institutions. But a polity based on the structural exclusion of a section of its population cannot reasonably be said to qualify as a democracy.

Some scholars have argued that "India increasingly demonstrates a key feature of an ethnic democracy and associated two-tiered citizenship, with the Hindu majority enjoying more *de jure* and *de facto* rights than the Muslim minority" (Jaffrelot 2019: 42; see also Adeney 2020). These formulations of "ethnic democracy" usefully caution against an uncritical acceptance of India as a liberal democracy, but they downplay the extent to which democracy in India is reduced to the shell of holding regular elections. To be sure, the dominant groups in ethnocracies value democracy (at least for themselves) and often take pride in their democratic institutions. But a polity based on the structural exclusion of a section of its population cannot reasonably be said to qualify as a democracy. Recent events in India, which have triggered bodies such as Freedom House and V-Dem to rethink India's status as a democracy, make it imperative for us to take seriously the category of ethnocracy when reflecting on India's democratic decline.

The most important contribution to India's ethnocratic transition stems from the ideological role in government of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological fountainhead of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The RSS strives to organise society in accordance with and ensure the protection of the Hindu dharma, or way of life. The RSS' commitment to Hindutva, or 'Hindu-ness' (Schottli *et al* 2015) at the expense of religious minorities is clear from a reading of its "vision and mission statement" that is publicly available on its website. Invoking the words of its founder, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, the statement declares:

> The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindusthan. It is therefore clear that if Hindusthan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. If the Hindu culture perishes in Hindusthan itself, and if the Hindu society ceases to exist, it will hardly be appropriate to refer to the mere geographical entity that remains as Hindusthan. Mere geographical lumps do not make a nation. The entire society should be in such a vigilant and organised condition that no one would dare to cast an evil eye on any of our points of honour.

The RSS' vision and mission statement endorses their founder's reference to India as "Hindusthan", a cultural term to refer to the land of the Hindus. This use of spelling cleverly manipulates the more common use of the term "Hindustan", which is of Persian origin and also refers to India as the "land of the Hindus" but in a pluralistic rather than unitary sense.

There has been a surge in RSS membership in recent decades. From 10,000 *shakhas*, or cells, in 1977 to 30,000 in 1994 and 40,000 in 2000; by 2019, the RSS claimed to have 85,000 *shakhas*, where members are trained in physical combat and organisational ideology. It has over 15 formal affiliates, including the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), which are the largest student and workers' unions in India, respectively (Bhatty and Sundar 2020: 633).

> The loss of Muslim-majority territories is invoked by the RSS in a bid to safeguard the 'Hindu' territories that comprise independent India.

Modi has credited the RSS with having shaped his own political and cultural views (Modi, 2014). Of the 66 cabinet members in Modi's first government, 41 were drawn from the RSS. That proportion increased in his second government. By early 2020, 38 of 53 members of Modi's cabinet had a background in the RSS. Such influence of the RSS on any government in independent India is unprecedented. Even previous BJP governments, under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004), were often at loggerheads with the RSS, as noted by the social scientist Pralay Kanungo (2006: 61-63).

Staking territory

The RSS' vision and mission statement is replete with allusions to territorial contests between Hindus and Muslims. The partition of the subcontinent into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan continues to be a source of anxiety. The loss of Muslim-majority territories is invoked by the RSS in a bid to safeguard the 'Hindu' territories that comprise independent India. The Muslim-majority region of Kashmir, which enjoyed a semi-autonomous status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, was singled out as "a thorn in the flesh" (despite insurgencies against the Indian state in other non-Muslim majority regions).

In line with the RSS' opposition to Kashmir's status and fulfilling a long-standing election promise, the Modi's government abolished Article 370 in August 2019, months after returning to power for a second time. Even as critics challenged the new law as unconstitutional, the nationalist overtones of the move promised to unite the country behind a single idea of India where there is no special dispensation for different areas. The country's only Muslim-majority state was not only deprived of its autonomous status but also stripped of its statehood. Indeed, this move illustrates a strategy to *subordinate* Muslim-majority territories to Hindu-majority ones.

> An emerging campaign against a so-called 'land jihad' neatly illustrates the territorial dimension of India's emerging ethnocracy permeating neighbourhoods and localities across the country.

RSS anxieties over the loss of Muslim-majority territories to Pakistan shape the government's attitude towards Muslims in Hindu-majority states as well. The emphasis on Assam in the vision and mission statement is noteworthy. It is borne of the claim that Assam's 25% Muslim minority would overwhelm the state over time. It is therefore unsurprising that, as Khosla and Vaishnav (2021) have detailed, Assam has emerged as a key territorial battleground over the recent amendment to citizenship laws in the country. Indeed, a key feature of this amendment is that "one religion - Islam - is put on a lower footing than others" (Khosla and Vaishnav

2021: 113). Under the terms of the amendment, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and Christians - but not Muslims - who immigrated into India from neighbouring Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh before 2015 will not be deemed "illegal migrants," even if they otherwise meet legal criteria for such a status. As India's citizenship law prohibits naturalisation to "illegal migrants" or citizenship by birth even if one parent is an "illegal migrant," the amendment makes it possible for undocumented non-Muslim immigrants and their children to apply for citizenship but continues to bar equivalent Muslim immigrants. Immigrants of non-Muslim communities from these three countries can now apply to obtain Indian citizenship after five years of residing in the country, while equivalent Muslim immigrants must wait 11 years. The amendment thus makes naturalisation harder for Muslims than for others.

An emerging campaign against a so-called 'land jihad' neatly illustrates the territorial dimension of India's emerging ethnocracy permeating neighbourhoods and localities across the country. The bogey targets Muslims who seek to buy property in Hindu-majority neighbourhoods. The allegation is that Muslims do this purposefully to reduce Hindus to a minority. Campaigns against 'land jihad' are couched as efforts to safeguard the Hindu character of neighbourhoods. Protagonists claim that such efforts are indispensable to prevent territories from becoming 'mini Pakistans', the epithet commonly used to describe Muslim-majority localities across Indian cities (Times of India, 2015). This claim has been invoked in regions as far afield as Jammu, Meerut, and Bangalore by RSS affiliates such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and amplified by journalists like Sudhir Chaudhury of the popular Zee News. As recently as early August, Hindu owners of houses in a neighbourhood in Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh protested the purchase of two houses by Muslims. In Delhi, Hindu groups have protested the construction of a resthouse for departing Muslim Haj pilgrims.

Such claims of a 'land jihad' have permeated electoral campaigns. In Assam, the BJP's Himanta Biswa Sarma, now the state's chief minister, promised the electorate:

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We are going all out against 'land jihad'. Certain elements have grabbed land from us in lower and middle Assam. They have not even spared the monasteries. This will definitely feature in our manifesto.
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A pervasive ethnonationalism

Ethnonationalism, rooted in Hindutva, has come to pervade political discourse since Modi's ascendance to power. Modi described himself as a "Hindu nationalist" in a rare interview on the eve of the 2014 elections. The BJP's election manifesto declared that "India shall remain a natural home for persecuted Hindus and they shall be welcome to seek refuge here" (BJP, 2014).

> Anyone who does not conform to the image of a good Hindu can find themselves singled out as the internal enemy. In recent years, the list of internal enemies has grown.

Such Hindutva ethnonationalism is distinct from secular nationalism, which draws on an *Indian* rather than a Hindu identity, and constitutes the second element of the emerging ethnocracy. Hindutva ethnonationalism targets religious and social minorities as internal enemies as much if not more than external enemies. Thus, Muslims and (to a lesser extent) Christians find themselves at the receiving end of Hindutva ethnonationalism.

Indeed, anyone who does not conform to the image of a good Hindu can find themselves singled out as the internal enemy. In recent years, the list of internal enemies has grown and come to include Dalits; liberals and leftists; activists who have raised issues of the environment and human rights; and anyone else perceived to be "anti-national". Dissent is muzzled, increasingly through official edicts: the list of people incarcerated on one pretext or the other include 80-year-old human rights activist Varavara Rao and Disha Ravi, a 21-year old environmental activist among others.

Political-economic exclusion of Muslims

The third element of India's emerging ethnocracy has deeper roots: the political and economic exclusion of Muslims. The Sachar Commission, appointed by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to investigate the socio-economic status of Muslims, had in 2006 noted important disparities between Hindus and Muslims.

Worker participation rates among Muslims lagged that of Hindus by almost 10 percentage points (Sachar Commission 2006: Annex Table 5.5, 341), but outstripped them by nearly 10 percentage points in informal manufacturing (ibid.: Annex Table 5.6, 342), 8 percentage points in petty trade (ibid.: Annex Table 5.7, 343) and 15 percentage points as precarious self-employed workers (ibid.:

Annex Table 5.8, 344). Literacy rates for Muslims lag that for Hindus, including the historically oppressed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (ibid.: 310). A fewer proportion of Muslims completed primary school (ibid.: Annex Table 4.6, 295) or middle school (ibid.: Annex Table 4.7, 296) than any other social group. Enrolment rates for Muslim children (6-14 years) were almost 10 percentage points lower than for the national average (ibid.: Appendix Table 4.3: 292). The mean years of schooling for Muslim children (7-16 years old) was lower than for every other social group including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (ibid.: Appendix Table 4.2: 290).

Muslim under-representation in military, bureaucratic and political positions is a long-standing trend. Jaffrelot (2019: 46) details the abysmally low levels of Muslim presence in the armed forces and in the public sector, which continue to be much-sought employment avenues for many Indians. Their presence in the higher echelons of these institutions was even lower. Adeney and Swindon (2019) document the *worsening* representation of Muslims in legislatures (16), judiciary (19) and administrative positions (page 18). Muslim representation in India's cabinets, the foremost decision-making body in India, have declined (Adeney, 2020: 10).

> Parties now in the opposition at least paid lip service to narratives such as "secularism" and "social justice" that signalled a commitment to include all sections of India's population within the political community.

From a historical perspective, the responsibility for much of the political and economic exclusion must be placed on the Congress and other parties that ruled India since Independence. However, these parties, now in the opposition, at least paid lip service to narratives such as "secularism" and "social justice" that signalled a commitment to include all sections of India's population within the political community. Furthermore, the Congress, under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and party president Sonia Gandhi - and pressurised by leftist, socialist, and regional parties - improved its earlier stance on secularism and social justice during its term between 2004 and 2014. Indeed, Singh had urged that religious minorities who suffered discrimination had first claim on the nation's resources.

In his first term, Modi promised to usher 'development for all' (via the slogan *sabka saath sabka vikas*) but allowed Hindutva to emerge as the defining characteristic of his government, a trend that, as we have seen, has been consolidated after the BJP's reelection in 2019. The political-economic exclusion of Muslims is likely to continue apace.

A deep-rooted ethnocracy

An ethnocracy has taken root in India. But this is unlikely to be accompanied by a formal suspension of elections in India. The RSS consciously projects itself as having opposed Indira Gandhi's imposition of the Emergency. Modi does not tire of proclaiming India's democratic lineage, unlike interwar European demagogues who pointedly rejected democracy. Indeed, the prime minister has gone on to extol India as the mother of all democracies.

> The principle that the dominant *ethnos* can rule the country and marginalise the others […] is being established well beyond the BJP and Prime Minister Modi.

It is unlikely that Modi's utterances are strategically oriented towards western audiences that might be worried about a democratic recession in India. Rather, the forums at which he has repeated claims of democracy being a quintessentially Indian ethos - election rallies, the houses of parliament - suggest an internal rather than an international audience for such narratives. The BJP has respected the mandate of the state elections they have lost since their spectacular reelection to power. The ethnocracy that has taken root in India draws on electoral victories and legislative majorities for sustenance. Hence their suspension is unnecessary.

Modi has declared himself at the service of his people rather than proclaiming himself as the equivalent of a *Fuhrer* or *Duce*. He remains committed to the RSS and is accountable to its Hindutva agenda. Modi's BJP-led government is subjected to checks and balances by its ideological parent. Indeed, such checks and balances are likely to prevent even as charismatic a leader as Modi from assuming absolute power.

These suggest that a *personalised dictatorship* is unlikely to emerge under Modi. But the principle that the dominant *ethnos* can rule the country and marginalise the others has firmly established itself. Images of Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal reciting the *Hanuman Chalisa* hymn, Congress scion Rahul Gandhi emphasising his roots as a *janeudhari* (sacred thread wearing) Brahmin, and West Bengal's chief minister Mamata Banerjee reciting hymns from the *Chandi Path* as public declarations of their Hinduness suggest that such a principle is being established well beyond the BJP and Prime Minister Modi.

> Even if the BJP loses power in 2024, the Hindu ethnocracy it is establishing will take more effort to dismantle than mere electoral victory of the opposition.

Such public performances of Hindu rituals are barely matched by performance of practices associated with other communities. The emergence and strengthening of a Hindu ethnocracy in India takes us well beyond the conjecture of whether the BJP wins or loses the next elections, scheduled for May 2024. Even if the BJP loses power in 2024, the Hindu ethnocracy it is establishing will take more effort to dismantle than mere electoral victory of the opposition. Its endurance will be a gift the RSS will truly cherish when it commences its centenary observations on 27 September 2024. Supporters of democracy in India can only hope that never comes to pass.

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