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India

The Trajectory of India Under Modi

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Narendra Modi has from his childhood been a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which had links to Italian fascism and Nazism; from the period when Modi was chief minister to this day, school textbooks in Gujarat, ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, an affiliate of the RSS), praise Hitler to the skies. The RSS has an expansive notion of Indian territory, encompassing Pakistan, Bangladesh and beyond, and it aims to set up a Hindu Rashtra – an exclusively Hindu state – in this territory.

This has involved assimilating other religions originating in India, like Buddhism and Sikhism, under the umbrella of Hinduism, while excluding Muslims, Christians, and others adhering to what are categorised as foreign ideologies, such as feminism, Marxism and rationalism, who are at best to be tolerated as second-class citizens, at worst exterminated. This political ideology, which they call Hindutva, is distinct from the religion, Hinduism. Followers of this ideology plotted and killed Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, because he did not want a fascist Hindu state.

The RSS has been an abiding influence on Modi's politics, but it is not the only one. An equally strong influence is his ruthless pursuit of personal power and his irresistible attraction towards the wealthy and powerful (the only time Modi shows any warmth is when he embraces foreign dignitaries, the most recent recipient of his warm embrace being Mohammed bin Salman during his February 2019 visit to India). Most of the time these two influences fit comfortably together, but there are also times when there is tension between them.

Chief Minister of Gujarat

Modi's early period in power illustrates the coincidence of his Hindutva roots and his own ambitions. Faced with likely defeat in Gujarat state assembly elections in 2002, he turned the burning of a coach of the Sabarmati Express filled with Hindutva activists just outside Godhra station into pogroms in which thousands of Muslims were mutilated, raped and killed with unimaginable cruelty. The only forensic investigation done into the burning concludes that the fire started inside the coach, whose doors and windows were tightly shut, and not from outside, where a crowd of local Muslims had gathered, making it extremely unlikely that Muslims were involved in it. Even if the fire was set by Muslims, there was of course no reason to gang-rape and mutilate hundreds of women and massacre innocents – including infants – who had nothing to do with it. But the Sangh Parivar – the vast family of organisations linked to the RSS – operates on the barbaric principle of collective guilt and collective punishment, whereby an entire community is held responsible for a real or imaginary crime committed by any member of it, and can justifiably be "punished" for it.

These mass killings and subsequent ones could safely be left to the Sangh Parivar to carry out. But targeted killings designed to help Modi to remain in power were organised by his right-hand man Amit Shah, who was appointed BJP president in 2014 and has remained in this office since. One of these killings was of BJP leader Haren Pandya, who was doubly troublesome as a popular figure who might displace Modi and as someone who had given evidence of Modi's role in the 2002 pogroms to a Concerned Citizens Tribunal.

When Pandya was found dead in his car, several Muslims were accused of killing him, but when the case was taken up in the High Court, the court found that the accusations were absurd. Subsequently, a petty criminal Sohrabuddin Sheikh revealed confidentially that Shah had approached him to do the job, and in 2005 he and his wife Kauser Bi were killed by the police claiming he was involved in a plot to assassinate Modi. In 2006 his associate Tulsi Prajapati, who had probably murdered Pandya, was also killed.

Sohrabuddin's brother Rubabuddin took the case to court despite threats to him, which is why some of this evidence came out, and Shah was named prime accused in the killing of Sohrabuddin. However, in December 2014 Brijgopal Harkishen Loya, the judge presiding over the case in a special Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court in Mumbai, died under mysterious circumstances in Nagpur after he had reportedly refused various inducements to give a judgement favourable to Shah. After that, perhaps unsurprisingly, Shah was acquitted. But he was also involved in various other 'fake encounter' killings, including the murder of young student Ishrat Jahan, who was also accused of plotting to kill Modi. Her mother too went to court, as a consequence of which a great deal of damning evidence came to light, but Shah was able to manipulate the courts to get away with everything. Modi too was able to cover up his role in the 2002 pogroms, but the case against him by Zakia Jafri, whose husband was mutilated and killed in one of the biggest massacres, is still awaiting a final verdict.

It was during his period as chief minister of Gujarat that Modi began to woo big business assiduously, providing industrialists with land, electricity and credit at throwaway rates, and dispensing with workers' rights and even minimal environmental protection. The wealth of his friend Gautam Adani skyrocketed during this period, while his links to India's wealthiest industrialists Mukesh and Anil Ambani were consolidated. This was a departure from the playbook of the RSS, whose base was more among small traders and the Hindu middle class. But it allowed Modi to pose not only as the preeminent defender of Hindu interests, but also as the sponsor of the 'Gujarat model of development'.

Ably promoted by PR company APCO and his own massive publicity machine, he was able to launch a blitzkrieg campaign to become prime minister in 2014, taking advantage of anti-incumbency against the ruling Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) as well as a concerted denigration of the party as irretrievably corrupt. While Hindutva was very much part of his campaign, it played second fiddle to the promise of development, jobs, and the elimination of corruption.

The war on democracy

Since Modi became prime minister in May 2014, two parallel processes have taken place. One is the massive proliferation of the RSS, whose branches have multiplied many times over, and its infiltration into every nook and cranny of society as well as the state. It had already set up numerous schools, but these increased exponentially. There was a concerted drive to install their ideologues as vice-chancellors in universities and at the head of all academic and research institutions, and pressure from the BJP's student storm-troopers to evict progressive teachers and students and alter the curriculum to include Hindutva myths being taught as history and science.

Perhaps learning from the revulsion that had resulted from the Gujarat carnage, the use of pogroms was dialled down, but in its place came a strategy that was in some ways even more chilling: the targeted arrest and killing of Muslims, especially educated ones, either by calling them terrorists and gunning them down in fake encounters, or by lynch-mobs accusing them of cow slaughter or so-called 'love jihad', an epithet used to characterise any romantic relationship or indeed friendship between a Muslim man and Hindu woman.

Traders transporting cattle could be stopped and lynched, or a mob could invade a family's home and beat its inhabitants to death on the accusation that they had eaten beef. Dalits, as the community charged with clearing away carcasses of cattle and removing their hide for leather products, were also assaulted, and adversely affected by the ban on eating beef. Occasionally Hindus were killed, either mistakenly or because, like police officer Subodh Kumar Singh, they tried to do their job and control the mobs. The majority of police personnel, however, went along with the killers, often arresting and charging survivors of the violence. Even if the killers were arrested, they were soon released, and in many cases felicitated by BJP MPs and MLAs (Members of state Legislative Assemblies). Muslims in particular have become second-class citizens who can be killed with impunity.

In such cases, Modi simply kept silent and allowed the rampages to continue; if, spurred by public and especially international outrage, he was compelled to speak out, he said something anodyne which had no effect on the violence. He reacted in the same way to shamefully sexist statements by his followers, including MPs. Indeed, how could he condemn others for doing what he had done in Gujarat, especially when he still needed their support? These storm-troopers attempting to realise a Hindu Rashtra and their many overtly respectable middle- and upper-class supporters formed part of his core support base, and he couldn't afford to alienate them. Even when he condemned such acts from platforms, he followed trolls engaged in hate speech and incitement to violence on social media, thus encouraging them; indeed, as former troll Sadhavi Khosla revealed, he actually employs an army of trolls to carry out this work.

The rule of law has been further undermined by the release of criminals who directed or participated in the Gujarat carnage as well as members of Sangh Parivar outfits who carried out a series of gruesome terrorist attacks in locations inhabited mainly by Muslims, like Malegaon in Maharashtra (two blasts), the Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad, the Ajmer dargah, and the Samjhauta Express. The constitutional promise of equality before the law and equal protection of the law has de facto been nullified, and many people apprehend that if Modi comes back to power it will be nullified de jure as well.

In parallel with the Hinduisation of Indian society, Modi moved systematically to centralise power in his own hands. His supporters were installed as governors in every state, with the power to manipulate election results when no party had an absolute majority. For example, when Congress emerged as the largest party in the Goa and Manipur state assembly elections of 2017, contrary to established procedure, the governors of these two states allowed the BJP to stake its claim first, buying up MLAs of other parties (in one case a party which had campaigned on an anti-BJP platform) to form a post-poll alliance. While the BJP had an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha (lower house) it did not have a majority in the Rajya Sabha (upper house), consisting of representatives of the state assemblies, and it was therefore important for the BJP to get a majority in the Rajya Sabha in order to get its legislation passed.

Early on, Modi declared his intention of creating a 'Congress mukt Bharat' – an India devoid of any opposition to the BJP – and when Congress stubbornly refused to die despite its drubbing in the 2014 elections, he constantly attacked it, as if permanently in election campaign mode. At the same time, dissidence and criticism by journalists, human rights defenders, NGOs, and ordinary citizens was crushed, often by the use of the anti-sedition law and Official Secrets Act – colonial-era laws used against the freedom struggle – which were now interpreted to criminalise any criticism of Modi or his government. A critical tweet or Facebook post could land a person in jail, as surveillance was stepped up. The extraordinary lengths to which the government went to take down Punya Prasun Bajpai's popular Hindi news programme on ABP TV, which did not shy away from criticising the government, sound almost surreal. But Bajpai is still alive. Many other journalists including Gauri Lankesh, posthumous winner of the Anna Politkovskaya award, have not been so lucky.

A veritable round-up of human rights defenders was launched after the Elgaar Parishad on 31 December 2017, in which participants took a solemn vow that they would vote against the BJP, and the Bhima Koregaon commemoration of a battle fought by Dalits on 1 January 2018, at which violence was instigated by the Hindutva right, both in BJP-ruled Maharashtra. The raids and arrests targeted prominent lawyers and activists who had fought for the rights of workers, minorities, Adivasis and Dalits. The prosecution accused them of forming an anti-fascist front to bring down the government, but perhaps realising that voting against fascism was not a criminal offence in India, then proceeded to accuse them of being 'urban Naxals' plotting to assassinate Modi, submitting evidence which every security expert familiar with the Maoists identified as patently fabricated.

What made this crushing of dissent all the more devastating was the parallel process by which Modi installed – or tried to install – people personally loyal to him at the head of every supposedly independent institution. These included the Enforcement Directorate (ED), tasked with eliminating income tax evasion, the Central Vigilance

Commission (CVC, looking after economic offences), the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), the CBI (the federal criminal investigation body), the National Investigation Agency (NIA, dealing with terrorism), the Election Commission (EC), and even the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). An unprecedented press conference by four senior judges of the Supreme Court (SC) in January 2018 protested against executive interference, warning that democracy would be destroyed unless the institution's integrity was preserved.

Thus the ED goes after Greenpeace and Amnesty India, raiding their offices and freezing their bank accounts, and also, along with the CBI, harasses opposition leaders, whereas economic offenders close to Modi and the BJP who have robbed Indian public sector banks of billions of rupees (Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi, Mehul Choksi, to name a few) are allowed to flee the country with their ill-gotten gains even after whistle-blowers have warned the government to stop them. Indeed, Former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan had given the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and Finance Ministry a comprehensive list of these fraudsters, which to this day has been kept under wraps, with attempts even by a parliamentary committee led by a BJP MP to gain access to it failing to do so. The NIA was used to investigate the husband of a 23-year-old Hindu woman who had converted to Islam, changed her name to Hadiya, and married a Muslim man, despite the fact that she testified in court that both her conversion and her marriage were voluntary, as though this conversion and marriage were somehow evidence of her husband's involvement in terrorist activities.

Modi's attempt to put his man at the head of the CBI came to light in 2018 when the existing head, Alok Verma, launched an investigation into allegations of corruption against Rakesh Asthana, who was being positioned to take his place. Asthana lodged counter-allegations based on fabricated evidence against Verma; the CVC, K.V. Chowdhary (also Modi's man), after asking Verma to withdraw adverse comments against Asthana that would prevent him from being appointed CBI director and failing to get his way, locked Verma out of his office in a midnight raid and appointed Nageshwar Rao – another Modi loyalist – as interim head of the CBI. Rao transferred all the officers working with Verma to the furthest corners of India so that their investigations, including one into corruption allegations against a close colleague of Modi in the PMO, came to an abrupt halt. Retired justice A.K. Patnaik, appointed by the SC to oversee an investigation into the charges against Verma, said there was no evidence that he had engaged in corruption, yet Modi saw to it that he was dismissed.

Removal of millions of voters from the voting lists and the appearance of millions of bogus voters, along with evidence of tampering with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in assembly elections, suggest that the BJP is willing to go to any lengths to win the 2019 parliamentary elections: an impression confirmed by Amit Shah's statement that losing the elections is not an option. Many Indians fear that if the BJP wins the elections, they will be the last for the foreseeable future, again an apprehension confirmed by Shah's statement that the BJP will be in power for 50 years. Ridiculing a fragmented opposition, Modi promised voters a 'majboot sarkar' (strong government). All the indications are that what he means by this is a totalitarian fascist dictatorship.

Economic mismanagement and corruption

How has the economy fared under Modi? The subordination of economics to politics typical of fascism can be illustrated by the campaign against cow slaughter and consequent lynching of Muslims accused of it. Hundreds of thousands of Hindu farmers who formerly bought cows for milk, sold them for slaughter when they stopped producing milk and bought another cow were now unable to sell their animals. Unable to feed them either – as one of them said, 'How can I feed an unproductive cow when I can't even feed my children?' – they simply set them free, turning these cows into predators eating crops and further destroying the livelihoods of farmers already committing suicide in record numbers due to poverty and indebtedness.

Modi's Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's economic policies of robbing the poor through increases in indirect taxes and enriching the wealthy by cutting direct taxes on them and writing off billions lent to them led to a huge increase in

inequality. The Rafale deal illustrates Modi's deep commitment to his small family of oligarchs. The previous UPA government had almost finalised a deal with French company Dassault for 126 Rafale fighter jets, 18 to be delivered ready-made and 108 to be manufactured in the public sector company Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in Bangalore, with full transfer of technology, when Modi came to power.

In a move that took everyone, including his own cabinet, by surprise, Modi unilaterally cancelled the deal, and along with National Security Advisor Ajit Doval negotiated a new deal to buy 36 jets ready-made from Dassault. Modi's deal was disadvantageous to India in every way – a much higher price per jet, no transfer of technology, no sovereign guarantee from the French government, no bank guarantee, the seat of dispute arbitration shifted from India to Geneva – but it installed his friend Anil Ambani, who had registered a defence company just days before, as offset partner.

Modi's Rafale deal came in for a great deal of criticism, both for the way it was arrived at – violating all the prescribed procedures and implicitly assuming that Modi has absolute power to do as he pleases – and because of the loss of jobs, technology and national security for India that it entailed.

But it is not the only time PM Modi has coddled a friend at the expense of the country. In 2014, Modi prevailed upon the State Bank of India to agree to lend his friend Gautam Adani \$1 billion for his project to mine coal in Queensland, Australia, build a railway to bring it to the coast, and build a port to ship the coal to India – a project so daft that no private bank would back it. Public protests against the loan from a bank to which Adani was already heavily indebted led to its abandonment. Then the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India made several changes to its regulations to allow Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Jio to rise rapidly to the top of the telecom industry, wiping out most of the competition. The quid pro quo for these handouts came in the form of unlimited support for Modi.

However, the biggest fiasco was demonetisation, again the brainchild of Modi. On 8 November 2016, Modi announced that at midnight all Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes – 85% of the currency in circulation – would cease to be legal tender. In the following days and weeks, all hell broke loose as over 90% of wage-earners who are in the informal economy lost their pay and in many cases their jobs, people were forced to queue up for hours to access the money in their own bank accounts or change their demonetised notes into legal currency, the new notes could not be dispensed by the ATMs, the prices of agricultural products plummeted and still they couldn't be sold, and over 100 people reportedly died as a result, with probably many more unreported cases.

The reasons cited for this drastic step were (1) to get rid of black money (even though not more than 6% of black money was kept in cash, most of it being invested in jewellery, real estate and foreign bank accounts), (2) to get rid of counterfeit currency, and (3) to deprive terrorists of funding. To cut a long story short, the new currency started being counterfeited almost immediately, terrorism did not decline, and years later, the RBI admitted that 99.3% of the demonetised currency had been deposited in banks, effectively laundering the black cash.

So none of the purported aims of 'notebandi' were realised. But after it, the BJP seemed to have unlimited quantities of cash, which it used to fund itself in state elections and buy up MLAs as and when it needed them. The catastrophic effects on the economy were covered up by government propaganda outfits releasing less and less credible statistics, until in January 2019 two independent National Statistical Commission members resigned in protest against the government suppressing a National Sample Survey Office report showing that the unemployment rate in 2017-2018 stood at a 45-year high. This confirmed the report by the independent Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy in September 2018 that demonetisation resulted in 3.5 million jobs lost, but in addition the labour force shrank by 15 million as the unemployed ceased to look for jobs.

Given that creating employment had been one of Modi's key promises, increasing unemployment, especially among the young, was leading to mounting dissatisfaction with his regime. Along with regular farmers' protests against rural

distress, this posed a threat to his re-election bid. This is probably what led to his determination to raid the RBI in late 2018 in order to get cash to hand out in various 'welfare' and infrastructure projects as he criss-crossed India at public expense for his election campaign. This was one step too far for RBI governor Urjit Patel, who resigned citing personal reasons in order not to be held responsible for Modi's reckless mismanagement of the economy and willingness to rob the RBI in order to win an election.

Is India safe in Modi's hands?

As we have seen, India's democracy is not safe in Modi's hands, nor is India's economy; but what about national security? Surely a 'majboot sarkar' is good for national security?

Not necessarily. Reducing the number of Rafale jets to 36 from the 126 that had been requested by the airforce shows scant regard for national security. And the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) deteriorated after Modi came to power, with a sharp increase in both civilian and military casualties. In February 2019, after the Pulwama attack in which over 40 security personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were killed in a suicide bombing carried out by a Kashmiri youth and claimed by Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM), Modi, who was engaged in a promotional photo-shoot, did not respond for hours instead of taking charge immediately. Since the BJP had brought down the elected state government of J&K, Modi and Doval were directly responsible for the abysmal security failure that allowed a vehicle packed with explosives to ram into a convoy of buses carrying CRPF personnel.

Subsequent airstrikes on Balakot in Pakistan were carried out with much fanfare. This forced Pakistani PM Imran Khan to respond to public outrage in his country by carrying out retaliatory airstrikes in India, and in the course of repulsing them an Indian plane was shot down and Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman captured. The attack itself generated a great deal of controversy, because the government claimed that hundreds of terrorists had been killed and their training camp destroyed, whereas international media, on the basis of visits to Balakot and analysis of satellite images, concluded that the bombs only felled pine trees, the only casualty was a villager who had been injured when his windows shattered as a result of the blasts, and the JeM madrassa in the vicinity suffered no damage.

One way of reconciling these reports with the Indian Air Force head's statement that they had struck the targets given to them is the view of various Western military analysts and security officials that JeM training camps in Balakot had moved elsewhere years ago, leaving behind only the madrassa. Contradicting government claims that what mattered was their demonstration of determination to strike inside Pakistan, analyst C. Christine Fair said on NDTV programme Truth Vs Hype that the intention of striking terror camps was not enough, what was required was the capability of doing so, which the strikes had not demonstrated. It is noteworthy that these Western analysts are as hostile to the Pakistani deep state's sponsorship of terrorism as anyone in India, yet they did not concur with the Indian government's claims.

According to these international accounts, Balakot was a botched operation. However, what if the real objective of the airstrikes, as BJP leader Yeddyurappa hinted, was to win votes for the BJP by whipping up war hysteria in India? This would explain the publicity given to an operation that should have been carried out in secrecy, and the failure to hit terrorist training camps. It would explain why Modi carried on smiling for the cameras after the suicide bombing in Pulwama, and his election campaigning continued uninterrupted; why he failed to condemn countrywide attacks on Kashmiri students and traders until the SC intervened; why he used the image of Abhinandan in his campaign despite being responsible for his capture; why he used images of the Pulwama victims despite his government having refused the CRPF's request to airlift them over the dangerous stretch of road, although it would have cost peanuts compared to the massive government expenditure on flying Modi and his entourage to and from project

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inaugurations, foreign trips and election rallies; why the ultranationalism whipped up by Modi and Shah was used by the BJP to brand anyone questioning the government as pro-Pakistan and therefore a traitor.

If this was the real objective, then inhabitants of South Asia have reason to be grateful to the international community for prevailing upon Imran Khan to de-escalate by releasing Abhinandan and rounding up the JeM, thus averting a war. And the national security of India is not safe in the hands of a man who is willing to risk a devastating war in order to win an election, a man whose obsession with consolidating his power drowns out all love for his country. It is worth remembering that Hitler's 'majboot sarkar' led Germany to defeat and ruin.

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