The Modi Moment

written by Aparna Sundar | February 16, 2024

As India's federal elections approach in 2024, it's time to reckon with what Modi means for India and the world.

India's decision to abstain from the October 26, 2023, UN General Assembly vote calling for a ceasefire in Gaza—in effect standing with Israel, the United States, and its allies in the Western bloc against the 121 countries who supported the motion—provides a snapshot of the contradictory claims of the government of Narendra Modi as it seeks to maneuver itself into a prominent position within a shifting global order. In other arenas, Modi has been quick to dismiss any criticism of his human rights record or democratic backsliding as coming from the imperialist and colonial "West," while asserting India's claim to be a leader of the Global South. This is an important part of Modi's appeal to his base. A recent survey in India showed that, while people are not optimistic about their own future in terms of the economy, welfare, or women's safety, they think India is doing well on the world stage.

The repositioning toward the U.S. axis is not new and has been taking place since India opened up its economy in 1991, moving away from the state-protected model, and drawing closer to the Western bloc economically, but also politically; positioning itself as the "world's largest democracy" with stakes in the "war on terror." This is a positioning Washington has embraced in its new Cold War with China, turning to India as an "Asian democracy" to be included in formations such as the Quad group of countries along with Japan and Australia. In a state visit to the United States in June 2023, Modi was received with a 21-gun salute, hosted at a White House dinner, and invited to address both houses of Congress. Meanwhile, for the fourth year running, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has recommended that the State Department designate India as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for its "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom"; the founder of Genocide Watch has warned of an impending genocide against Muslims in India; the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* have been consistently documenting evidence of Modi's expanding authoritarianism; and India continues to slide on almost every global index—democracy, freedom for journalists, poverty, and so on.

While geopolitics may be the basis of the U.S.-India relationship, other factors also inform India's growing closeness to Israel under Modi, and specifically to the government of Benjamin Netanyahu. As Azad Essa documents in *Hostile Homelands: The New Alliance Between India and Israel*, India started quietly buying defense technology and training from Israel in the 1960s, while maintaining its official position in favor of Palestinian self-determination. But under Modi, the defense partnership is enhanced and celebrated, and the support for Palestine more conditional. Modi and Netanyahu recognize and respect each other as authoritarian leaders; Hindu nationalism and Zionism have strong affinities as movements of majoritarian domination; the two states see

themselves as fellow defenders against “Islamic terror”; and Modi’s pet capitalists now have major investments in Israel. These features flow from three central and interlinked features of Modi’s “New India”: the success of the project of *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalism) aimed at transforming India into a Hindu nation; Modi’s ability to secure the support of capital through enabling a predatory form of accelerated accumulation for his cronies and more broadly, for capitalists as a class; and his ability to bind the public through a canny combination of personal appeal, populist welfare measures, institutional capture, and straightforward repression.

Hindu Nationalism

What distinguishes Modi from other populist authoritarian politicians such as Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Duterte, or even Trump, is the long and deep ideological and organizational basis of the movement to which he and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) belong. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the organization spearheading the Hindutva movement of Hindu supremacist nationalism, was founded in 1925 as one of the currents of the nationalist resistance to British colonialism, drawing its ethno-racial supremacist vision of nationhood from the ideologies of European fascism.

From the start, the movement has had two prongs. First, to construct a Hindu identity out of the diverse sects and practices of the subcontinent under a patriarchal, *Brahminical* (privileged caste), scriptural definition of Hinduism. This involves resisting challenges from *Dalits* (oppressed castes) to its deeply hierarchical caste order and, simultaneously, coopting them and *Adivasis* (Indigenous communities) into the Hindu fold in order to construct a majority. And second, to create stakes in this identity by defining others, such as Muslims and Christians, as alien to the nation. The RSS has an extensive organizational apparatus to build broad-based cultural consent for its doctrines, with thousands of fronts across the country, catering to different social groups—children, youth, women, university students, workers (including the country’s largest central trade union federation), soldiers, Adivasis, and different caste groups. It runs schools and carries out charitable and service work, including relief work in natural disasters. The BJP, formed in 1984 out of earlier parties affiliated with the movement, rose to prominence though mass campaigns aimed at resisting the expansion of affirmative action programs to a wider range of castes, and at erasing symbols of India’s Muslim history in favor of its “authentic Hindu” past.

Since Modi was first elected federally in 2014, the genocidal intent of his efforts at erasing Muslim life have become clear. While it is inconceivable that 196 million Muslims, some 14 percent of India’s population, can be done away with, they can be subject to violence and humiliation, silenced, disenfranchised, and deprived of basic human rights. From the rewriting of history textbooks to the renaming of places, their over millennium-long presence in India’s history is being systematically erased. The very means for them to “eat, pray, love” have been criminalized, beginning in 2014 with a growing number of lynchings of Muslim men by vigilante groups for eating or trading in beef, or for “luring” Hindu women into marriage in order to convert them to Islam (“love jihad”). Poor Muslim men have been particular targets, set upon and beaten up by vigilante mobs and asked to recite “*Jai Sri Ram*” (Long live Lord Ram). Even much-loved film stars and cricket players, if they are Muslim, have not been spared vicious trolling and threats. Calls for the economic boycott of Muslim businesses have deepened the economic and social marginalization that was already a pervasive fact of Muslim life in many parts of the country, with Muslims unable to find homes for rent in many cities. Hijab-wearing women were prevented from attended college in a BJP-ruled state, allegedly because the constitution forbids the wearing of religious symbols in public institutions. Hindu prayers and practices remain routine in such institutions. It has become increasingly common during Hindu festivals to see large mobs of Hindu men wearing saffron bandanas, armed with sticks and swords, marching aggressively through Muslim neighbourhoods chanting anti-Muslim songs and slogans, beating up Muslims and destroying their property. No doubt they believe themselves to be obeying the extremist Hindu religious leaders who have declared the rape and killing of Muslims a

religious duty.

Modi and his party members have remained silent in the face of this violence, occasionally distancing themselves, calling it the work of isolated individuals, but more often making dog-whistle references to provoke and intensify the polarization for electoral purposes. Almost none of those who have carried out the lynchings and other attacks have been arrested. On the contrary, men involved in the gang rape of a Muslim woman and the murder of several Muslims in the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, when Modi governed the state, as well as the men involved in the lynching of a Muslim cattle trader, have been released and welcomed as heroes by BJP legislators. Police routinely stand by and watch the violence, and Muslims defending themselves have had their shops and properties razed to the ground by municipal governments in BJP-ruled states on grounds of "illegal construction."

In Modi's second term, which began in 2019, BJP governments passed a series of laws aimed at the disenfranchisement of Muslims. Several BJP-ruled states have passed cow protection laws and laws forbidding inter-faith marriages (supposedly only entered into for purposes of conversion), adding the force of the police and courts to legitimize vigilante violence. In 2019, three major legislative and legal changes, including a Citizenship Amendment Act, irrevocably transformed the nature of citizenship, effectively making Muslims second-class citizens of a Hindu nation.

One such law, the Kashmir Reorganization Act, institutionalized India's occupation of Kashmir. The Act removed the limited autonomy granted to Kashmir under the Indian constitution and did away with the law preventing land being sold to non-Kashmiris, opening the way for full-scale occupation and demographic transformation. Kashmir continues to be one of the most militarized regions in the world, with frequent internet shutdowns, random arrests, especially of journalists and human rights activists, under draconian "anti-terror" laws, and disappearances and "encounter killings" carried out by a police and military granted impunity by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, in force in Kashmir for over three decades now.

The total mobilization of state and society to wage war on what the Hindu nationalists consider the "old India"—a multi-ethnic, multi-denominational nation, both in terms of its social fabric and its constitutional guarantees of secularism, equality, and non-discrimination—has other targets as well. Christians (like Muslims, seen as subscribing to a faith that originated outside the Indian landmass) have been subject to violent attacks for allegedly carrying out conversion activities among Adivasis and Dalits (potentially whittling away at the Hindu "majority"). Electoral calculations about the benefits of creating a hardline Hindu base similarly informed the recent campaign of rapes and murders of members of Christian communities in the northeastern state of Manipur. An extended protest movement against neoliberal farm laws was sought to be delegitimized by alleging that the Sikh farmers leading it were "separatists" and "terrorists." Others too have been cast as "anti-national" and subject to both vigilante and state violence. Left and liberal intellectuals and activists, journalists, university faculty and students, artists, feminists, and members of civil society organizations—all have been portrayed as members of an established, anglicized, "pseudo-secularist" elite, against whom the BJP portrays itself as the representative of the authentic nation.

Predatory Capitalism

The relatively high growth rate of the Indian economy (7.2 percent in 2022-23) masks the growing crises of inequality, unemployment, and pauperization, reflected more accurately in the data on such things as malnutrition, infant mortality, and women's health. Modi's government has failed spectacularly to address India's biggest economic challenges—increasing investment in manufacturing, attracting foreign investment, job creation, and export growth. In part, the growth rates reflect the consumption power of a middle class that, while large in absolute terms, is a small

sliver of India's population of 1.4 billion. A greater part of the explanation, however, lies in the nature of the growth, generated by the purchase of distressed assets by international speculators, the acquisition of land and resources at extraordinarily low costs, and privileged access to capital and to existing markets for favored capitalists.

The government has passed a fleet of neoliberal laws to improve the "ease of doing business," including labor reforms decimating regulation and industrial relations standards, and changes to environmental impact and forest protection legislation that ease corporate access to natural resources. Plans to further privatize public assets include allowing commercial mining of coal; increasing the foreign investment limit in military manufacturing; auctioning airports to public-private partnerships; and giving public sector assets to private players on "long-term lease." Three new farm laws rushed through parliament with scarcely any time for debate in 2020 would effectively have reversed policies that ensured that farmers were able to sell a certain amount of their produce at a fixed price and opened agriculture to corporate-dominated markets, had the farmers not fought back.

In his fourteen years as chief minister of the state of Gujarat, where he fine-tuned his model of government, Modi built a close relationship with leading Gujarati corporate actors, who bankrolled his federal campaign in 2014. These cronies—especially those closest to him, Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani—have been richly rewarded, assisted in acquiring land cheaply and given licenses to build everything from ports to universities. In March 2022, Hurun Global Rich List reported that Gautam Adani, who had become India and Asia's second-richest person in 2020, added $49 billion to his wealth in 2021—more than the combined addition of wealth by the top three global billionaires Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Bernard Arnault—and representing a 153 percent increase in his wealth in a year when India was devastated by the pandemic. Mukesh Ambani, who continues to be the richest Indian, saw a 24 percent rise in his wealth that year. In the ten years since Modi became prime minister, Ambani's wealth has grown 400 percent and Adani's 1,830 percent; although, as a January 2023 report by Hindenburg Research revealed, stock manipulation and accounting fraud enabled a massive overvaluation of Adani's wealth. More broadly, the number of Indian billionaires has grown, as has the wealth they have added over the last decade: the head of the Hurun Global Rich List noted that over the last ten years, Indian billionaires added some $700 billion to their cumulative wealth, equivalent to Switzerland's GDP and twice that of the UAE.

The rich have also grown richer through policies such as the shift to indirect taxes, like the Goods and Services Tax, the cut to corporate tax rates, and the abolition of the wealth tax for the super-rich, contributing to the growth of the nation's fiscal deficit. While the predatory capitalism Modi has enabled has generated vast new numbers of the displaced, dispossessed, and pauperized, India's social welfare expenditure remains among the lowest in the world. Health spending remains at 1.2 to 1.6 percent of GDP and actually declined in 2021, and education spending has averaged 3 percent of GDP for the past two decades. In 2022, Oxfam reported that during the pandemic an estimated 46 million Indians fell into extreme poverty.

An Electoral Autocracy

In its 2021 report on the status of democracy, the Swedish V-Dem Institute downgraded Indian to an "electoral autocracy." This formulation captures the increasingly performative role in India of democratic rituals to demonstrate legitimacy even as much of the process of governance is removed from public accountability. Like most other public institutions, the Election Commission, historically respected for its neutrality, is now subject to political capture. The BJP has a vast amount of funds, more than all other parties combined, raised, among other routes, through opaque financial instruments called electoral bonds that draw massive corporate donations made anonymously from India and abroad. The party is constantly in election mode, and the funds are necessary to maintain

its formidable election machine as well as to induce sitting legislators to switch sides.

The performance of democracy is also one that Modi the populist seems to delight in. Like some Hindu gods, Modi is a man of many avatars. He is both monarchical—issuing policies as decrees and raising monumental projects to mark his reign—and a man of the people, making constant reference to his humble origins, unlike the Gandhis of the rival Congress party, with their caste and dynastic privilege. He wears a new outfit each day and designer accessories, yet his followers (or worshippers, as his critics call them) describe him as an ascetic. His seemingly ill-thought and erratic decisions—like making worthless 87 percent of India's currency with a few hours' notice, or imposing a national lockdown for COVID-19 overnight—were hailed as "masterstrokes" and evidence of the ability to make tough decisions required of a strong leader. His technocratic projects—Smart Cities, bullet trains, a Digital India—even if poorly executed and incomplete, create an image of action and modernization, while his speeches skillfully weave in Hindu nationalist images and tropes.

Modi's welfarism shares these populist features. Rather than long-term investments in nutrition, health, and education, the welfare he delivers takes the form of small, targeted cash transfers, and limited schemes for the distribution of toilets, cooking gas cylinders, housing, and electricity and water connections, with women as particular beneficiaries. Distributed centrally, rather than in response to local needs, the welfare is personalized, with Modi's picture on the gas cylinders, food parcels, and billboards promoting the schemes.

Modi's populist projections are aided by his effective capture of the public sphere. Already in 2014, the corporate-owned media had built him up even before he was elected. Since then, this media has been kept in line by threats to withdraw government advertising revenue that constitutes a large proportion of its income, or to carry out raids for income tax violations. Meanwhile, new sources of pro-government media have been created, and his crony capitalists have bought the few independent ones. Social media plays another important role, with a paid troll army of thousands disseminating BJP propaganda and an even larger number of sympathizers disseminating fake news and hate-filled memes, while trolling its opponents with the vilest of threats. Paralleling the control and construction of what counts as news is the non-collection, suppression, or fudging of data, combined with the systematic undermining of universities and research institutes.

The state is at war with civil society. Non-profits have been threatened with police action or the cancellation of their licenses to receive foreign funding. Among the countries found to have deployed the Israeli company NSO's Pegasus surveillance software, India's target group was among the largest and included opposition leaders, journalists, and a range of civil society actors. Dissenters and truth-tellers—protestors, opposition party leaders, farmers, journalists, student leaders—have been arrested on cooked-up charges and held without bail under draconian anti-terror legislation. Even among his worshippers, there is fear of the surveillance state and the crumbling of legal and institutional protections.

Resistance

None of Modi's moves have gone uncontested, with court challenges around the Kashmir Reorganization and Citizenship Amendment Acts, electoral bonds, Pegasus, and so on. Journalists have covered the crimes, uncovered the swindles, and critical pieces continue to be produced in some of the English language newspapers. Non-BJP parties, in power in about half the states, have strongly protested the federal government's increasingly centralizing tendencies around fiscal matters and cultural and linguistic homogenization. Some judges on the Supreme Court, and lower courts, have shown independence in challenging arbitrary arrest and other non-constitutional measures. There have also been mobilizations, especially in Modi's first term, against the growing

instances of anti-minority violence. Two massive movements in particular, unprecedented in scale since the nationalist movement of the 1940s, are hopeful signs.

The first began in November 2019 against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that effectively makes Muslims in India second-class citizens. Initiated by students at the Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi, the movement spread across the country, with protests and demonstrations held even in smaller towns. Large numbers of previously apolitical Muslims, as well as significant numbers of non-Muslims, joined in. A historic sit-in initiated by the women of Shaheen Bagh, a largely Muslim neighborhood in Northeast Delhi, lasted a couple of months until it was shut down by the pandemic lockdown in March 2020 and, simultaneously, many of the anti-CAA activists were arrested, allegedly for inciting violence. Although the movement was disbanded, the government has been slow to make regulations based on the CAA, a sign of the scale of the opposition.

The second movement was in response to the three farm laws aimed at corporatizing agriculture. Starting in November 2020, some 250,000 farmers from three northern states camped at three sites on the borders of Delhi for a year, with the sole demand of having the farm laws repealed. Farmers' organizations from across the country sent contingents. The action was coordinated democratically by a national committee. Over the year that the farmers remained camped, the resistance to the corporatization of agriculture grew to connect issues of labor and agricultural distress, patriarchy and women's work, caste and landlessness, and Hindutva and the repressive state. With all his attempts at repression and cooptation failing, Modi finally agreed to withdraw the laws a few weeks before elections in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

These two large movements, the earlier protests, and the range of Hindutva's targets—Muslims and Christians, Dalits, Adivasis, women, environmentalists, liberals, journalists, students and faculty, artists—have created alliances well beyond the left. In India, "the Left"—referring mainly to the mainstream parties of the left, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)—was already facing criticism for its lack of inclusion of caste and identity issues and its historic attachment to industrial development. From 2014 onward, new Blue (caste-oppressed/Dalit movements), Red (Communist), and sometimes Green alliances have been forged on campuses and more widely, joining hands with national trade unions, the Gandhi-inspired social movements against development-induced-displacement that defend the rights of natural resource dependent communities, and the civil and democratic rights organizations that have been a vital part of the democratic landscape since the Emergency of 1975–77. Their efforts are documented and amplified by a small but influential section of digital media, most of it less than a decade old, that continues to speak truth to power despite court cases and the surveillance and arrests of its journalists.

Much of this resistance faces severe government repression. A crucial question is how the resistance will translate in electoral terms in the federal elections, likely to be held in May 2024. A promising move is the recently formed I.N.D.I.A. alliance that includes all the major opposition parties, including the Indian National Congress, the BJP's chief contender federally. But this is a big tent, in their own words, and questions abound as to how well it will hold together and whether it is already too late to offer an effective challenge, given that the BJP never really ceases being in electioneering mode. Recently concluded elections in five states that saw the BJP win three of them further confirm doubts about the strength of the opposition.

Global Implications

In thinking about the global implications of the Modi moment, attention must first be paid to India's diaspora in the West. The VHP, or World Hindu Organization, a member of the RSS family, has been working since the 1960s to build the Hindu community worldwide. Modi's successful blending of

market friendliness and “Hindu culture” (yoga, attire, and the like) represents a moment of cultural arrival for this diaspora. Indians are now the second largest immigrant group in the United States, numbering some four million. A large portion of the more successful among them come from privileged-caste Hindu backgrounds and are an important constituency for Hindutva, contributing to the BJP and to charitable organizations that channel funds to the RSS, and increasingly adopting the violent symbols and practices of the Hindu mobs in India.[1]

But other members of the Indian diaspora are actively taking the fight to them. Campaigns led by Dalit organizations have won recognition for caste as a protected category in universities such as California State, UC Davis, Harvard, Brandeis, and Brown, and other places like the U.S. city of Seattle, the Canadian cities of Brampton and Burnaby, and the Toronto District School Board. Progressive diasporic organizations, including those representing India’s religious minorities, are working to challenge the flow of funds to the BJP/RSS in India, and to try and influence the American and Canadian governments and publics to recognize India for what it is. These efforts have in turn led to a campaign by Hindutva organizations, taking from the Zionist playbook of using “antisemitism” to deflect all criticism of Israel, to try to get criticisms of Hindutva labeled as Hinduphobia. And so, the fight goes on.

Recent events have brought home to the wider North American left the implications of some of these battles. In September 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stood up in parliament to make the startling announcement that India was behind the assassination of a Sikh separatist activist in Canada in June 2023. And in November of that year, U.S. intelligence reported that they had warned a U.S.-based Sikh separatist activist of a similar threat on his life, adding to the concern that the Indian state is willing to extend its repression beyond its borders.

The Indian right-wing is a big player in the growth of a global far-right, not necessarily in the sense of organizational cohesion or global conspiracy, but in the sense of shifting public discourse in that direction, undermining liberal democratic values, delegitimizing any kind of equalitarian mobilizations, normalizing fake news and anti-science perspectives, and aligning with White supremacists and Zionists. Fake news and images generated by the Hindutva universe have been a major part of social media disinformation around the genocide in Gaza.[2] There have also been reports that Israel has requested India to send up to 100,000 workers to replace Palestinian workers.

The left in India and its diaspora is fighting back. A petition addressed to U.S. state officials, already signed by some 3,000 Indian Americans, calls for a ceasefire in Gaza. It also highlights the Hindu-right sources of disinformation helping to justify the attack on Gaza.[3] And all the major Indian trade unions, except the BJP-affiliated Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (Indian Workers› Union), put out a statement announcing that they would resist any India-Israel labor agreement if implemented.[4] But to turn back the fascism that is Modi’s India will take a much stronger and more coordinated international response than global progressive forces have thus far demonstrated.

Notes

1. Max Daly, Sahar Habib Ghazi, and Pallavi Pundir, “How Far-Right Hindu Supremacy Went Global,” *Vice*, Oct. 26, 2022.

2. Mohammed Asif Khan, “India is the Epicentre of Hate and Misinformation Against Palestinians,” *Middle East Monitor*, Nov. 10, 2023.

3. Indian Americans for a Ceasefire Now.

4. “Indian Trade Unions Stand with Palestine, Reject ‘export deal’ to Replace Palestinian Workers in Israel,” *People’s Dispatch,* Nov. 16, 2023.