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# India Under Modi

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OVERREACTS

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On 27 September 2018, Prakash Javadekar, who heads the Ministry for Human Resources Development (or HRD, which includes the Department of Education) in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, made a matter-of-fact admission at an education conference hosted by a media group. Replying to a query about the government's plans to refashion history textbooks, he said "We have not rewritten a single chapter in the last four years."

The revelation was significant. Ever since Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to power with a modest majority in the 2014 general election, the government's critics—disproportionately concentrated in academia and the media—have been insisting that it is set to refashion the "idea of India." They charge that the Modi government's ideological agenda includes the destruction of India as a secular, democratic republic and its replacement by a nation built on Hindu-majoritarian impulses. The rewriting of India's past by incorporating fanciful theories and anti-Muslim prejudices is said to be a part of this sinister project.

On 6 March 2018, Reuters issued a dramatic report that the minister of culture had established a committee for the "holistic study of [the] origin and evolution of Indian culture since 12,000 years before [the] present and its interface with other cultures of the world." In case that sounded overly abstruse, Reuters decoded its real objective: "to use evidence such as archaeological finds and DNA to prove that today's

Hindus are directly descended from the land's first inhabitants many thousands of years ago, and make the case that ancient Hindu scriptures are fact not myth."<sup>1</sup>

"Interviews with members of the 14-person committee and ministers in Modi's government," the report went on, "suggest the ambitions of Hindu nationalists extend beyond holding political power in this nation of 1.3 billion people—a kaleidoscope of religions. They want ultimately to shape the national identity to match their religious views, that India is a nation of and for Hindus. In doing so, they are challenging a more multicultural narrative that has dominated since the time of British rule, that modern-day India is a tapestry born of migrations, invasions and conversions."

If this "investigative" report by a reputed international news agency aimed at exposing the Modi government's quiet plans to subvert Indian pluralism, it proved a damp squib. First, the committee was made up of people with less-than-formidable academic credentials. Its more forthright members appeared to have more conviction than expertise. Second, the committee met only twice during its one-year tenure, which ended on 11 November 2017—hardly time enough to develop a blueprint to turn the world of history writing upside down. Even a year after the committee's term ended, the Ministry of Culture had not released any report submitted by it. Finally, when HRD Minister Javadekar—whose Education Department bureaucrats would presumably be responsible for overseeing changes to textbooks—was questioned about this committee formed by the culture minister, Javadekar claimed total ignorance of his colleague's initiative.<sup>2</sup>

Convuluted conspiracy theories, it would seem, often have very mundane explanations. That the Hindu-nationalist ecosystem has been deeply concerned about "distortions" in the writing of Indian history is an open secret. Among the points of concern is the "Aryan invasion" theory that was initially propounded some 150 years ago and remains hotly disputed. Then there are concerns about attempts by "secular" and Marxist historians to ascribe the wave of destruction of Hindu temples to power politics rather than Islamic fanaticism. Finally, Hindu nationalists have worried that the study of Indian history has come to be dominated, in academia at least, by Marxist scholars who have received active patronage from previous governments led by the Indian National Congress (INC), the long-dominant party that the BJP has displaced. Some of these historical disputes have spilled over into the study of ancient Hindu texts. In dealing with these texts, it is claimed, Western scholars have deliberately misread and misinterpreted India's heritage.

Alongside the intellectual-cum-political battles with Marxists, secularists, and irreverent Sanskritists, there has been a parallel tussle. For a long time, a section of notables with connections to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—the BJP's mother organization and a

group often claimed by its critics to be a Hindu version of the Muslim Brotherhood—have complained that the BJP is insufficiently attentive to the culture wars that must be fought and won if political hegemony is to be established. The first NDA government, which held office under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee from 1998 to 2004, had as its HRD minister Murli Manohar Joshi, a former physics teacher who reveled in ideological combat, particularly with the left. Although Joshi made only modest progress in modifying the history curriculum used by schools, he was ever willing to assert the importance of cultivating a Bharatiya (Indian) outlook that could be juxtaposed against a Western-dominated, globalizing temperament.

Modi spent his formative years as an RSS full-timer and was nurtured in the belief systems of that organization, but his political priorities as an elected official have been different. Rather than wage ideological warfare and pit the entire range of anti-BJP forces against himself, he has chosen a managerial approach that puts a premium on economic achievements and the effective delivery of services by the state. As prime minister, he has identified education as an instrument for the development of skills for an India that must embrace technology and globalization enthusiastically. In his political scheme, the ideological war must take a temporary backseat and must be subsumed in the larger quest for a nationalist resurgence. Rather than obsess over the origin of the Aryans, Modi has preferred to highlight themes such as national unity, national security, cleanliness, entrepreneurship, technology, and moral integrity—themes that his opponents find difficult to openly rubbish.

At the same time, as every politician is aware, there is a need at least to appear to be receptive to the peripheral concerns that often drive ideologically committed activists. The committee appointed by the Ministry of Culture was more akin to a safety valve. It gave individuals, possibly handpicked by the RSS, a measure of official recognition, provided them a forum for airing their concerns and frustrations, and, in short, made them feel relevant. In India, the establishment of committees is a time-tested way of stalling anything that could be construed as awkward, and this committee to explore “holistic” routes to uphold India’s true heritage was no exception. It speaks volumes about the innocence of political journalism—and the journalists’ lack of access to the real centers of decision making—that the two correspondents who wrote the Reuters dispatch deemed this committee consequential.

### **Predetermined Condemnation**

The contrived scare over state-sponsored historical revisionism is an element of the liberal groupthink that has vitiated the political environment in India. Even before the 2014 general election had been completed, notables claiming to represent the conscience of India were

agonizing over the implications of a Modi victory. At the heart of their apprehension was Modi's conduct as chief minister of the state of Gujarat during the deadly riots that broke out there in March 2002, after an arson attack on a railway carriage carrying Hindu activists returning from the temple town of Ayodhya. In an April 2014 letter to the *Guardian* that coincided with the initial rounds of voting, a clutch of prominent public figures with strong links to India, including Sir Salman Rushdie, Sir Anish Kapoor, senior U.K. Labour Party MP John McDonnell, Dame Helena Kennedy, Deepa Mehta, and Professor Homi Bhabha, wrote:

Without questioning the validity of India's democratic election process, it is crucial to remember the role played by the Modi government in the horrifying events that took place in Gujarat in 2002. The Muslim minority were overwhelmingly the victims of pillage, murder and terror, resulting in the deaths of more than 2,000 men, women and children . . . Modi himself repeatedly refuses to accept any responsibility or to render an apology. Such a failure of moral character and political ethics on the part of Modi is incompatible with India's secular constitution, which, in advance of many constitutions across the world, is founded on pluralist principles and seeks fair and full representation for minorities. Were he to be elected prime minister, it would bode ill for India's future as a country that cherishes the ideals of inclusion and protection for all its peoples and communities.<sup>3</sup>

In an unusual step, the *Economist* asked, "Can anyone stop Narendra Modi?" and recommended that Indians should vote for the INC owing to Modi's lack of contrition for the Gujarat riots:

If Mr. Modi were to explain his role in the violence and show genuine remorse, we would consider backing him, but he never has; it would be wrong for a man who has thrived on division to become prime minister of a country as fissile as India. We do not find the prospect of a government led by Congress under Mr. [Rahul] Gandhi an inspiring one. But we have to recommend it to Indians as the less disturbing option.

If Congress wins, which is unlikely, it must strive to renew itself and to reform India . . . . If, more probably, victory goes to the BJP, its coalition partners should hold out for a prime minister other than Mr. Modi.<sup>4</sup>

What comes across quite clearly is the predetermined condemnation of Modi. Unable to fight the BJP electorally, India's self-appointed conscience keepers were determined to ensure that their warnings to voters would be justified by subsequent events.

As the Modi government enters the final months of its five-year term, it is important to spell out what the regime has *not* done. For a start, democracy has not been remotely compromised. The freedom of speech and the freedom of the media remain robustly intact, along with the licentious freedom accorded to social media. There are television channels and publications that are fiercely hostile to the present dispensation and others that are supportive of it. Indian democracy has always been

marked by a cacophony of voices, and this tradition persists, without fear of interruption. The argumentative Indian lives on.

Second, the independence of the judiciary has been not only maintained but strengthened. Much to the displeasure of the executive, the judiciary has intruded into areas that, strictly speaking, should be outside its jurisdiction. There have been judgments—such as the one upholding the legality of the Aadhaar biometric identity-card program—that have come as a big relief to the government. At the same time, the Supreme Court has intervened in religious customs, to mixed reactions. Far from becoming a “committed” institution—as Indira Gandhi had pressed it to do in the mid-1970s—the judicial branch has kept the executive on tenterhooks. Indeed, there are now fears of judicial overreach.

Third, the integrity of democratic elections has not been compromised. The independence of the Election Commission of India has been maintained. The BJP has won many elections but also lost many. The opposition did raise a clamor over “doctored” electronic voting machines after its candidates lost a series of elections. Yet the fears turned out to be baseless and fanciful. Following the BJP’s defeat in a clutch of by-elections, the opposition quietly shelved its demands.

Fourth, there has been no tinkering with the 1950 Constitution. There are sections of the Hindu-nationalist fraternity that have sought to extend to Hindus the special privileges granted to minority communities. However, these demands remain discussion points. So far the government has not initiated any moves either to dilute or to remove the constitutional safeguards that protect minority faiths. The religious pluralism of India remains uncompromised despite a fierce debate over what “secularism” should mean in the Indian context.

Finally, the Modi government has expanded economic freedom by making procedures more transparent and rule-based. The discretionary powers available to the bureaucracy were a source of harassment and corruption. These have been drastically reduced, much to the relief of businesses and ordinary citizens. Much more needs to be done, but the progress has been significant. In 2014, India occupied 142<sup>nd</sup> place in the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index; in 2018, it had moved up sharply to 77<sup>th</sup> position.

## **Governance and a Hostile Establishment**

Naturally, as with all government functioning, there are points of friction. In recent months the government and the Reserve Bank of India have been in conflict over enhancing liquidity in the economy and increasing credit to businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises. Both sides have their own compulsions, but what is important is that the institutional autonomy of the Reserve Bank has not been compromised.

There have also been points of friction between the central government and state governments over issues as diverse as river-water sharing, land acquisition, and educational policy. This is inevitable in a system where different political parties with divergent outlooks often share the helm. Yet what is significant is that the once wearily familiar spats over revenue-sharing between New Delhi and the states have virtually ceased under the Modi government.

The Goods and Services Tax (GST), which passed both houses of Parliament unanimously and went into effect on 1 July 2017, was revolutionary. India took a giant step forward in the direction of establishing a unified market where goods and services could be traded seamlessly across state boundaries. The establishment of a GST also involved a fundamental renegotiation of the terms of the country's federalism. Both the center and the states agreed to a scheme of pooled sovereignty, with each giving up some powers for a common objective. Under the new federal dispensation, neither the central government nor the states can unilaterally revise the existing terms under which revenues are collected and spent. Modifications to the GST can only be effected through an agreement of the GST Council, on which both the central government and all the states are represented. It speaks volumes for the efficacy of the new institutional arrangements that so far all the changes in the original GST architecture have been managed by consensus and without recourse to voting. If this pattern persists, it will initiate a new chapter in federal relations. Political differences will persist, but there will also be a protective layer of institutional stability around government finances.

The introduction of the GST happened within a couple of years of the abolition of the Planning Commission—a relic from the days when a redistributive central government regulated the terms under which the states could spend money on development. Apart from needless centralization, the old system encouraged a one-size-fits-all approach that was inappropriate for a country as large and diverse as India. It also bred political resentment and undermined national unity. The Modi government's new cooperative federalism has paved the way for states to determine their own development priorities. It has also encouraged healthy competition among states as they vie to show which can achieve greater efficiency.

Modi's record of governance is impressive by the standards of earlier governments. He came to power on the strength of very lofty expectations; in 2019, voters will decide whether he receives another term in which to consolidate his government's achievements.

Even if some of his measures, notably the demonetization of cash holdings, have proven very controversial, these cannot explain the visceral hate that some among his critics have showered on him. Part of the dissatisfaction owes to the agenda of some of the BJP's more extreme supporters—the lynchings of suspected beef traders being a notable ex-

ample—and the intemperate rhetoric of Modi fans on social media. Yet Modi's government has consistently distanced itself from its extremist fringe, which, in turn, is unhappy that the prime minister and his team have not taken a more proactive role in the culture wars.

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The sheer scale of the antipathy shown toward Modi cannot be explained by either political developments or his governance record. This antipathy springs, rather, from profound shifts in decision-making structures and in what we might loosely call the Establishment.

When Modi assumed power in New Delhi in 2014, he was the proverbial Beltway outsider. He had been chief minister of Gujarat for thirteen years prior to that, but much of that time had been spent fighting a concerted onslaught by the Establishment. This included a sustained legal offensive to establish his direct culpability in the 2002 riots and his lack of cooperation with the Congress-controlled central government in investigating the disturbances. There was also the 2005 decision of the George W. Bush administration to deny him a U.S. visa, the only occasion this has happened to the holder of a constitutional position in India. In the English-language media he was decried as a “mass murderer.”<sup>5</sup> Modi saw off these challenges and turned the tables on his opponents. The lesson that he learned from his Gujarat experience was that it is possible to win elections and govern effectively without attempting to coopt the erstwhile Establishment in any way. Unlike Vajpayee, Modi has not even tried to make himself acceptable to the habitués of New Delhi's tonier precincts. Indeed, he has shunned the capital's social life and its associations as far as possible.

For much of the seven decades since India became independent, the INC had governed it, either directly or indirectly. The INC's hold over the institutions of power—both political power and soft power—was formidable. By contrast, the BJP was regarded as a collection of outlanders—provincial Hindu bumpkins lacking cosmopolitan graces. In addition, the BJP lacked intellectual depth. Its hold over the citadels of intellectual power—the economists, the historians, English-speaking editors, the NGO stalwarts, the literary and art circles, and old money in general—was tenuous. At best it could count on a few provincial notables, some film stars, and others whose lifestyles were distinctly noncosmopolitan.

Instead of trying to enter the Establishment, the Modi government set about working to create a counter-Establishment. The Modi gov-

ernment's appointments to cultural bodies, educational institutions, and other state-sponsored organs were inevitably based on political affiliations. The more important feature was that there was a wholesale exclusion of the old elite from centers of influence and decision making. Yesterday's beautiful people found themselves out in the cold, excluded from institutions that they had come to regard as their entitlement. They had been replaced by people with very different social assumptions, lifestyles, and experiences, and with whom foreign journalists and diplomats had never engaged.

The change was initially viewed with mirth. Once it became apparent, however, that Modi was in it for the long haul, mockery and disdain turned to anger and fury. As the 2019 general election approaches, there is now a determined bid by the *ancien régime* to regain its old clout and influence. Laments over a lost secular India and warnings about a new and ugly "Hindu-nationalist" India are consequences of this class war.

## NOTES

1. Rupam Jain and Tom Lasseter, "By Rewriting History, Hindu Nationalists Aim to Assert Their Dominance over India," Reuters, 6 March 2018, [www.reuters.com/investigation/special-report/india-modi-culture](http://www.reuters.com/investigation/special-report/india-modi-culture).

2. "Panel on Indian Culture Not an Attempt to Rewrite History, Says Government," *Times of India* (Mumbai), 7 March 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/panel-on-indian-culture-not-an-attempt-to-rewrite-history-says-government/article-show/63193679.cms>.

3. Salman Rushdie et al., "If Modi Is Elected, It Will Bode Ill for India's Future," *Guardian*, 10 April 2014, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/if-modi-elected-india-future-gujarat](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/10/if-modi-elected-india-future-gujarat).

4. "India's Election: Can Anyone Stop Narendra Modi?" *Economist*, 5 April 2014, [www.economist.com/leaders/2014/04/05/can-anyone-stop-narendra-modi?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/modi](http://www.economist.com/leaders/2014/04/05/can-anyone-stop-narendra-modi?fsrc=scn/tw/te/pe/ed/modi).

5. See, for example, Zahir Janmohamed, "Could a Hindu Extremist Become India's Next Prime Minister?" *The Nation*, 13 May 2014, [www.thenation.com/article/could-india-as-next-prime-minister-be-hindu-extremist](http://www.thenation.com/article/could-india-as-next-prime-minister-be-hindu-extremist).