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Journal of Democracy, Volume 31, Number 1, January 2020, pp. 193-202 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0016>



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AN ILLIBERAL INDIA?

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In May 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi won a second five-year term with a parliamentary majority unprecedented in recent decades (303 of 545 total seats). Under his leadership, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has for all practical purposes abandoned any pretense of upholding India's constitutional commitment to the values of secularism, political pluralism, and intellectual freedom.¹ With a demoralized and anemic opposition in Parliament, a once-feisty press largely cowed, and judicial independence under threat, little now stands in the way of Modi and his ideological fellow travelers making India an illiberal democracy.

The BJP's antisecular, majoritarian vision threatens liberal democracy in India on three levels: societal, ideological, and institutional. If the party implements this vision, India will probably remain an electoral democracy, but its claim to be a liberal democracy—a country of free-wheeling debate and discussion, robust check-and-balance institutions, and solid safeguards for rights and freedoms—will become a thing of the past.

Illiberal proclivities were already evident during Modi's first term, from 2014 to 2019. That period saw a spate of attacks against prominent dissenters, especially those who challenged the rise of Hindu bigotry and wrote in the vernacular press. Prominent public intellectuals known for their critical voices were shot to death under mysterious circumstances.² The fears that they had expressed about the rise of Hindu zealotry were well founded. There were no mass Hindu-Muslim riots, but there were lynchings of Muslims, especially in northern India, over claims that they were smuggling cattle for slaughter.³ On the topic of

these vigilante murders, the normally voluble prime minister maintained a deafening silence.

To be fair, the Indian National Congress (INC), the BJP's main opponent and long the dominant political party, hardly has clean hands. For more than two decades, it sought votes by making concessions to illiberal forces. Even before the Islamic Republic of Iran issued its notorious *fatwa* against the Indo-British writer Salman Rushdie for his 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*, the Indian Finance Ministry under INC prime minister Rajiv Gandhi slapped an import ban on the book. A decade later, during the first term of INC prime minister Manmohan Singh, the great modernist painter M.F. Husain was forced to flee India for Dubai after his nude paintings of Hindu goddesses brought death threats against which the government appeared unwilling to protect him.

The INC was all too willing to truckle to illiberalism, but it did not have the kind of illiberal agenda that the BJP and its Hindu-nationalist parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps or RSS), harbor. The INC also faced stronger normative and institutional restraints than does the BJP with its large majority. Firmly ensconced in office, that party is now free to act on its Hindu-majoritarian proclivities, and there are signs that it fully intends to do so.

Cracking Down on Dissent

Before the close of Modi's first term came a crackdown on dissenting public intellectuals. In late August 2018, authorities arrested five prominent activists from across India under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, which permits warrantless detentions. The five stood accused of abetting communist guerrillas who have been wreaking havoc across several Indian states over the past two decades. The Indian Supreme Court swiftly ordered the activists transferred from police custody to house arrest. As of this writing in December 2019, three are still being detained while two are out on bail. Government plans regarding prosecution remain unclear.

In February 2019, with the elections looming, the Modi government showed that it had not lost its willingness to hound public intellectuals who air dissenting views. That month, the well-known academic and Dalit activist Anand Teltumbde was picked up in Mumbai on charges of inciting a riot. He had attracted attention at a 2017 literary festival by calling Modi a "narcissist par excellence" who could end up being worse than Hitler, with policies that added up to "fascism plus something." Hundreds of scholars worldwide signed a statement defending Teltumbde and demanding that the charges against him be dropped.⁴

Although it has not been in office long, the second Modi government has lost little time in going after those sections of India's historically free press that still dare to challenge government views and claims. On 9 August 2019, television news producer Prannoy Roy and his wife and

business partner Radhika Roy were stopped at the Mumbai airport and told that they were deemed a flight risk due to a corruption investigation, and hence would be barred from leaving the country for their vacation.⁵ The influential news channel that they own and operate, NDTV, has been a government critic, leading to charges that the investigation into their dealings was cover for political targeting.

The use of the state's coercive powers against those who dare to question its policies is widening. In early September 2019, a prominent New Delhi-based political activist, Shehla Rashid, was charged with sedition after she tweeted that the Indian Army had been violating human rights during the month-old lockdown in the Indian-controlled portion of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir.⁶

Another border state—Assam in the Northeast—is the scene of perhaps the most disturbing societal development. Since 2015, the BJP government in Delhi has been updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a document that dates back to the early 1950s and which deals solely with Assam. As of 31 August 2019, under the terms of the updating, those who had migrated to the state from abroad after 24 March 1971 (or whose forebears had so migrated) were declared noncitizens.⁷ That last date was chosen because on the day following, the Pakistan Army launched a massive, violent crackdown in restive East Pakistan, causing millions of refugees to flee across the Indian border. The crackdown led to full-scale civil war in East Pakistan, followed by the successful Indian military intervention of December 1971 and East Pakistan's decision to declare itself an independent new country under the name Bangladesh.

The terms of the NRC hark back to the Assam Accord of 1985, which the central government in Delhi negotiated after widespread protests by indigenous Assamese who were worried about illegal immigrants (most of them Bengali-speaking Muslims) coming from neighboring Bangladesh. Immigrant activists fear that the NRC updating will disenfranchise the poor, including many poor Muslims.

With the deadline for the NRC update having passed, it appears that at least 1.9 million people out Assam's total population of 33 million have been rendered stateless by the updated application of citizenship requirements. Those deemed noncitizens have been accorded 120 days (counting from 31 August 2019) to appeal their cases to the Foreigners Tribunals of Assam. For those unable to persuade the Tribunals to include them on the NRC, the final recourse will be the notoriously slow-moving Indian court system. In the meantime, the Indian government has been building detention camps in Assam.⁸ In early September 2019, Home Affairs Minister Amit Shah, who is also the party president of the BJP, vowed that the Modi government "will not allow a single illegal immigrant to stay" in Assam.⁹ Beneath the stated goal of reversing illegal immigration, critics see a desire to expel from this part of India any Muslims who cannot produce citizenship credentials.

Minister Shah, it is reasonable to surmise, has little use for India's inherent diversity and pluralism. This was evident from remarks he made on 14 September 2019 to commemorate Hindi Day, which marks the Constituent Assembly's 1949 decision to make Hindi the "official" language of the Union (with provisions allowing the continued use of English for various official purposes). India has no "national" language, and there are besides Hindi 22 other languages listed as "scheduled" in the constitution. In a speech and a series of tweets, Shah said that "it is very important to have a language of the whole country which should become the identity of India in the world."¹⁰ As the most widely spoken tongue (known by about 40 percent of the populace), he continued, Hindi should be that language. In making these claims, Shah was reiterating a long-held BJP preference—and resurrecting the idea even though attempts in the 1960s to privilege Hindi had led to widespread unrest in areas, especially Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, where non-Hindi languages predominate. Not surprisingly, leaders from outside the north-central "Hindi Belt" reacted to Shah's Hindi-promoting gambit with outrage and demands that he retract his comments.

During its first term in office, the Modi government dealt heavily-handedly with one of India's most prestigious, albeit also mostly left-of-center, educational institutions, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. I have already noted in these pages how in 2016 the government arrested a JNU student leader on sedition charges following an intemperate but mostly banal speech he gave in February of that year.¹¹ After this came interference with internal administrative procedures in a bid to block faculty—not merely at JNU but across the country—from criticizing the right-wing government.¹²

Unfortunately, these efforts to curb the independence of universities, both public and private, seem to be gathering steam. In June 2019, in the populous state of Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a BJP politician who is also a firebrand Hindu priest, issued an ordinance that instructed private universities not to allow any "antinational activities." When asked to specify what might constitute such behavior, the state government declined to provide an official answer. Adityanath's deputy suggested that the ordinance was needed to prevent any repeat of protests such as the February 2016 demonstration at JNU.¹³

The latest challenge signals that the reelected Modi government with its larger parliamentary majority has no intention of slowing its efforts to take over universities and control their faculty members. In July 2019, a JNU official wrote one of India's most respected historians, Romila Thapar, to demand her credentials so that her fitness to remain a professor emerita at the school could be assessed. Thapar, who was born in 1931 and who retired in 1991 but remains active, refused to send in her resume. More than needless (Thapar is widely published and has received six honorary doctorates), this insult couched as administrative routine was an

attempt to belittle a public intellectual known for her criticisms of the BJP government's majoritarian leanings and of its efforts to rewrite history textbooks.¹⁴ Scholars at home and abroad rallied to Thapar's cause. Her high professional stature aids her in her unyielding stance, but the government's willingness to target someone of her standing is doubtless making its intended impression on younger academics. The omen for the future of academic freedom in a BJP-ruled India is not good.

The Assault on Institutions

The country also faces a multipronged assault on its institutions. Some signs of this impending attack were already visible during the 2019 election campaign. Long celebrated for its strict nonpartisanship, the Election Commission of India (ECI) displayed signs of campaign-period bias in favor of the government. In late March, less than two weeks before the polls opened, a television channel known as NaMo TV appeared. It was all Modi, all the time, carrying nothing but the prime minister's speeches and other pro-BJP content. Opposition parties complained that the channel was violating the ECI's Model Code of Conduct, which had come into force on March 10. The ECI placed restrictions on NaMo on April 10, the day before voting began (Indian general elections, the world's largest, are held in stages over about five weeks). The channel went dark permanently on May 17, two days before the last stage of voting. Critics including Rahul Gandhi, the head of the INC and Modi's main opponent, felt that NaMo's code violations had been obvious, and charged that the ECI had reacted slowly and weakly due to a bias in favor of the BJP. The ECI, tweeted Gandhi, was guilty of "capitulation before Modi and his gang." The Commission, Gandhi went on, "used to be feared and respected. Not anymore."¹⁵ Additional complaints revolved around the ECI's tardiness in stopping the election-eve release of a biographical film about Modi.

No fewer than 66 retired senior civil servants signed an April 8 letter to the president of India expressing their "deep anguish" that the ECI's "crisis of credibility" was putting at risk "the very foundation of Indian democracy."¹⁶ Only when faced with this and a barrage of other charges did the ECI take such mild measures as admonishing Chief Minister Adityanath to be "more careful" in his utterances. The ECI now stands compromised in the eyes of voters. Given how long this crucial watchdog institution was revered for neutrality and independence, this represents a fall from grace that is real and serious.

Another sign that the BJP government was weakening key institutions had come in December 2018, when it named Shaktikanta Das to a three-year term as head of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). For the first time in nearly three decades, a person with no advanced degree or high-level professional background in economics (Das is a retired civil servant with two history degrees) would be running India's central bank.¹⁷ Das,

who had previously held official posts dealing with economic matters, had been in charge of implementing Modi's ill-conceived and controversial November 2016 demonetization effort, in which large amounts of currency were withdrawn at one blow, causing considerable dislocation. Since taking over at the RBI, Das has not made any decisions that have stirred concerns about the bank's continued independence. Given his role in carrying out a dubious policy that had disastrous economic consequences and his lack of suitable credentials, however, concerns remain about whether he can and will keep partisan influence away from what is supposed to be a quasi-autonomous monetary-policy institution.

Then there is the question of how the Modi government is using the law-enforcement powers of the state. In August 2019, a few months after the election, authorities carried out the high-profile arrest of a former finance minister under the INC, P. Chidambaram, on money-laundering and corruption charges. It seemed like a made-for-TV spectacle: On the night of August 21, agents from the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate scaled the walls of the ex-minister's New Delhi home while cameras rolled. An INC spokesman complained bitterly that the government was singling out a prominent member of the main opposition party, even calling the arrest a "broad daylight murder of democracy."¹⁸

In time, the courts will determine Chidambaram's guilt or innocence. Meanwhile, doubts about the nature and timing of his arrest are understandable. Lawbreaking among India's political class is sadly not uncommon: According to one report, 159 of the current lower house's 545 members are facing serious criminal charges.¹⁹ The INC is already in disarray; a moonlight police raid on one of its leading members can only put it at a further disadvantage. Even if the charges against Chidambaram hold up, the rise of suspicions that law enforcement is becoming politicized cannot be anything but bad for Indian democracy.

A Major Change—and No Debate

Perhaps the most disturbing action on the part of the government, one that raises significant questions about the future of Indian federalism, came on 5 August 2019. On that day, the BJP used its large parliamentary majority to end the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and declare it a union territory. To be fair to the BJP, this action item had long been on its agenda, and it had made the abrogation of Kashmir's special status a plank in its 2019 electoral platform. Yet the manner of proceeding was so precipitate as to bespeak a reckless disregard for the fundamental nature of India as a federal republic. There was no discussion or debate in Parliament, opposition protests were of no avail, and no effort was made to consult the legislative assembly of the state even though the constitution requires this. Turning a state with its own government into an area directly governed from New Delhi is a momentous

step. To see such a measure railroaded through the way it was in early August 2019—with the state assembly suspended and completely shut out of the process—was a shock even to veteran observers of the BJP and its sometimes heavy-handed ways.

According to the 2011 national census, about 68 percent of Jammu and Kashmir's 12.5 million people were Muslims, making it the only Muslim-majority state in India, which as a whole is about 80 percent Hindu. Kashmiri Muslims now fear that with Jammu and Kashmir's special status revoked, people from other parts of the country will begin buying property and moving in. If the Supreme Court upholds the change of status, there will be no legal barrier to this. What Kashmiri Muslims fear—becoming a minority in their home region—BJP activists would likely welcome, viewing it as a plus for national integration.

In the meantime, this northernmost part of India is in lockdown. Political leaders are under house arrest, many protesters are in hiding or jail. Press coverage is controlled, and foreign journalists are barred. Security forces carry out cordon-and-search operations amid allegations that they are violating rights.²⁰

Despite the government's efforts to act as if things are returning to normal, the situation in Kashmir remains tense. Opposition members of the Parliament of India as well as U.S. senator Christopher Van Hollen (D-Md.) have been denied permission to visit the region. Late in October 2019, however, a handpicked group from the European Parliament, mostly representing right-wing parties, was taken on a scrupulously orchestrated tour of Kashmir. One MEP, Chris Davies of the British Liberal Democrats, had his invitation withdrawn after he sought unfettered access. Finally, and no doubt much to the Modi government's discomfiture, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly stated while visiting India that the situation in Kashmir was "unsustainable."²¹

On 8 November 2019 came another blow to pluralism when a five-judge panel of the Supreme Court handed down a judgment on the long-running matter of the destroyed Babri Mosque. The court case had been lodged after a mob of Hindu zealots demolished this Muslim place of worship in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, in December 1992. The Court ruled that the mosque's 2.77-acre site must be turned over to the government, which could then form a trust to build a Hindu temple there. At the same time, the Court granted five acres in another part of town as the location for a new mosque. What is noteworthy is that while the judges deemed the Babri Mosque's destruction a lawless act, they nevertheless decided to give the government the site for use by the Hindu community.

Hindu activists and zealots were jubilant while the Muslim plaintiffs expressed their unhappiness but accepted the ruling. There is little doubt that this was another strike at the edifice of Indian secularism. The jurists were, in effect, admitting that the mosque tear-down was illegal but letting a Hindu temple go up on the spot anyway—it was a clear accord-

ing of special privilege to the sentiments of a segment of the majority religious community.

Illiberal proclivities have long dogged Indian politics. This is owing both to the calculations of politicians who want votes and to the fears of institutionally weak public authorities who worry that strongly backing individual and minority rights in fraught cases will bring strife. Giving in to the demands of the loudest and most volatile, even if they are only a minority, has always seemed the prudent course. Thus have books been banned, artists exiled, students arrested, and extremists accommodated.

The conditions that are unfolding in present-day India are something new, however. The illiberalism that we see today is not something yielded to out of political cynicism or official anxiety, but is instead the deliberate, orchestrated program of a successful political movement that is bent on undermining liberal values and practices and demolishing the intellectual, cultural, and political pluralism without which huge, diverse, democratic India cannot hope to subsist, let alone be great. This movement has an ideological vision of India as a unitary state where Hindus are privileged. In order to achieve this vision, the movement must push aside the principles of secularism and equality upon which the Republic of India is founded. Given the BJP's parliamentary majority, the weakness of the political opposition, and a mostly pliant media, the party is moving ahead with its strategy like a veritable juggernaut.

If the government keeps pressing down this path with no real hindrance, someday even India's status as an electoral democracy could be at risk. The opposition is in disarray. If the media and the judiciary become cowed and if the Electoral Commission keeps behaving timidly, India's record of free and fair elections may end. This dire prospect does not seem imminent, but the trends are not good.

Can the march toward an illiberal India be stopped or contained? There is a quartet of forces that might act as stumbling blocks. The first is civil society. Despite threats and harassment, it has yet to surrender. Public intellectuals unafraid to risk their livelihoods, and in some cases even their lives, have kept up a steady criticism. Perhaps they will gain a wider hearing.

Whatever its inner ideological commitment, the government relies for electoral success on what political scientists call "performance legitimacy." In the Indian context, this means in the first instance that welfare benefits bring votes.²² Distributing these benefits (some of them continued from INC days) has bolstered the BJP's standing among poorer Indians. Economic growth is needed to pay for these programs, however, and here may be the second stumbling block. If growth slows, Modi's popularity will be in danger and the opposition will find itself favored with political opportunities unheard of today. The final quarter of 2019 saw a downturn; if the government cannot turn it around, the BJP and its Hindu-majoritarian program will be in political jeopardy.

The third possible stumbling block is the deeply rooted social reality of caste. For years, despite its message of Hindu majoritarianism, the BJP had trouble attracting lower-caste Hindu voters. In 2019, it did the best it ever has with such voters, winning an estimated 38 percent of the total lower-caste vote. Can such success be sustained? In India, lower-caste (which often means poor) voters take part in local, state, and national elections at high rates. Their political sophistication is growing. In 2019, they bolted from caste-based parties in North India, especially in Uttar Pradesh, to back the BJP. They are expecting tangible material improvements, however. If these are not forthcoming, lower-caste votes cannot be taken for granted. The BJP's ability to reach beyond its traditional higher- and middle-caste constituencies may thus prove fleeting.

Finally, and in a related vein, the sheer cultural, linguistic, and ethnic variety of the country will not be easily steamrolled. India's inherent diversity will stand in the way of forging a regime that embraces illiberalism. Indeed, it can be argued that India has endured as a working, if chaotic, state precisely because of its commitment (even if flawed and partial) to *liberal* democracy. Only universal liberal principles and rights—rights that belong to all, without regard to personal status—can provide a basis for holding together India's congeries of regions, languages, religions, castes, classes, and ethnicities. Dismantling this constitutional edifice and jettisoning the ideal of equality before the law in the name of the BJP's Hindu-nationalist utopia could have consequences that are disturbing beyond measure. Let us hope we never see them.

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