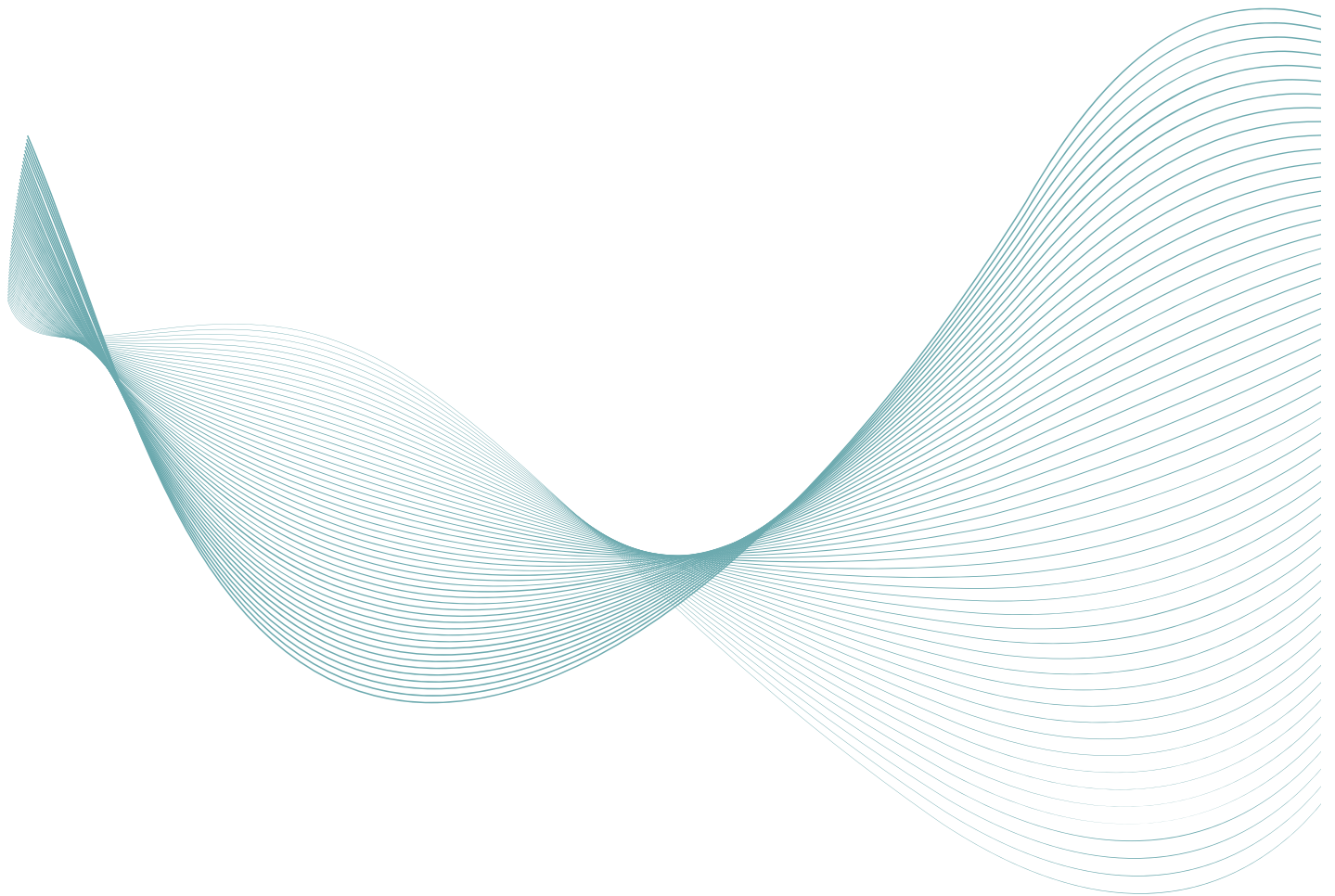


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# Democracy and Autocracy

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“The Troubling State of India’s Democracy”



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## Editors' Introduction

Anindita Adhikari and Nandini Dey, University of Michigan

Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base, social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality, and fraternity as the principles of life.... Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated living.

—B.R. Ambedkar, 1949

Unlike older, Western democracies, India established universal adult franchise at its founding, endowing its citizens with wide-ranging political and civil rights. Defying expectations, democracy in India has persevered alongside deepening social and economic inequalities. The increased suppression of civil liberties in recent years, especially the freedoms of expression and association, has brought another faultline to the fore. Ambedkar's words in 1949 were therefore prescient, as he struck a cautionary tone in his final speech to the Constituent Assembly reminding India's future leaders and its people that the achievement of political equality rests on the enduring pursuit of civil, economic, and social rights. With national elections coming up in early 2024 and diverse opposition parties banding together to challenge the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the center, the question therefore is not simply one of changing the "form of government" but of determining the *form of democracy* valued by Indians.

The central concern of the authors in this issue is the status of democracy in the world's largest multi-ethnic, federal republic—India. The essays draw on the forthcoming edited volume, *The Troubling State of India's Democracy* (University of Michigan Press, Emerging Democracies series). The volume makes a timely contribution by analyzing the health of Indian democracy and the pillars that hold up the polity. Together, the contributors provide a comprehensive view of the institutions, ideas, practices, tensions, and contestations that comprise India today. The volume focuses on three axes of democratic backsliding: the centralization of power in the executive and the erosion of institutional checks and balances, the promotion of an exclusionary nationalism, and a clampdown on civil and political rights. In their joint essay in this volume, the editors Larry Diamond, Šumit Ganguly, and Dinsha Mistree parse out whether the illiberal turn in India's democracy is driven by the leadership of Narendra Modi and the BJP or if it is symptomatic of larger social forces, such as intensifying prejudices and anxieties of the Hindu majority.

Citizenship has been an important instrument in the ruling party's ethno-nationalist agenda. The introduction and swift passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in late 2019 created a new, explicitly religious basis for access to Indian citizenship for *non-Muslim* nationals from India's neighboring countries. The passage of the CAA opened old wounds surrounding belonging in the country, born as it was out of an imperially-mandated bloody Partition that caused the deaths of over 1 million people and the displacement of over 12 million people from their homes.

But substantive citizenship has been eroded by more than just citizenship law. As Maya Tudor's contribution to this issue points out, Hindu nationalism has taken root in at least two other policy domains: *educational curricula reform*, which reimagines India's history to glorify Hinduism's achievements, and *cow protection reform*, which has translated to lynchings of and violence primarily against Muslims, Dalits, and Christians. John Echeverri-Gent, Aseema Sinha, and Andrew Wyatt's essay illustrates how the BJP machinery has politicized India's economic governance to sustain a personalistic regime. This comprises an "inconsistent policy mix" that includes, among others, the introduction of a single Value Added Tax (VAT) to replace disparate state taxes, the 2016 "demonetization" decision that withdrew 86% of India's currency then in circulation, and the alteration in the method to calculate the GDP to more favorably reflect economic performance. Kanta Murali points to all this and more to argue that India is, in fact, moving towards competitive authoritarianism with the personalization of power and the Prime Minister's centralizing style of governance all leading to the intensification of centralization already inherent in Indian federalism. Eswaran Sridharan's essay traces the rise of the BJP alongside the decline of the Congress Party since the late 1980s. While there is clear divergence in their brands of nationalism, geographical spread of support, organizational strength, and communication strategies, intra-party democracy in both remains weak. Even as the BJP acquires all the features of an "umbrella party," it is directly or indirectly in power in only 15 out of India's 28 states. As its hegemonic position expands, the only viable restraints, if not challenges, may come from the federal system, opposition-ruled subnational governments, and the constitution itself.

Recent electoral victories in state elections point to productive openings at the subnational level. States like West Bengal and Karnataka have shown that redistributive coalitions can become electorally successful and communal platforms can be countered. In addition to subnationalism, we add two further axes to those examined in this issue. While the question of civil and political rights is one that receives a fair amount of attention, we also believe it is imperative to look at social and welfare rights and their relationship

to democracy. This lens allows us to expand our analytical frame to ask not just whether democracy addresses social inequalities but what kind of social rights can strengthen democracy. For instance, rights-based welfare programs introduced in the 1990s and 2000s—such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)—embedded new modes of local governance and forums for citizen participation that expanded the downward reach of the democratic state. Despite the erosion of civil and political rights at the national level, social rights and their accompanying structures of democratic governance at the subnational and local levels have not been entirely dismantled. Will citizen participation and oversight through these platforms preserve institutional spaces that deepen local democracy? Or, will the retreat of social rights and their replacement with the idea of welfare as conditional on the demonstration of self-sufficiency (*atmanirbharta*) reinstate the patrimonialism of the colonial state?

We should also consider the international and geopolitical contexts. The 2024 elections in India are also of international interest for multiple reasons in the present moment. New Delhi serving as host for the G20 meeting in September 2023 was the realization of yet another step in Prime Minister Modi's vision of India becoming the "voice of the Global South." Several Western countries see India as a partner in countering China's economic dominance as evidenced by the initiative to create a new India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) at the G20 meeting. Should it materialize, the IMEC will be a combination of a rail and road transit network that would connect India and Europe via countries in the Middle East. What kind of "voice" can India purport to be when its pluralist and secular character is eroding even within its borders? What role might India, a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, play in the current crisis in the Middle East? These considerations demonstrate that the state of Indian democracy has ripple effects beyond its national boundaries. Transnational forces and international events in turn affect the fate of democracy within its borders.

The final section of the newsletter brings together anthropologist Mukulika Banerjee and political scientist Sushmita Pati for a conversation on their recently published books set in rural Bengal and Delhi's urban villages, respectively. They situate their analyses of the intersections between democracy, capitalism, urbanization, and globalization in events, relations, and cultures of the everyday. Their exchange offers important insights for how political subjectivities and social ties are differently constituted or, to use Banerjee's term, "cultivated" in these two settings. The two books offer a fine-grained view of how active citizenship in rural and urban India is refracted through distinct social and institutional structures. India is home to some of the world's largest cities while more than 900 million people continue to live in the countryside. Its democratic future is therefore

inextricably tied to the evolution of political behavior and political economy in both contexts, and, as Banerjee and Pati's joint response indicates, to how urban and rural dynamics shape each other through (but not only through) migrants and their networks.



Larry Diamond, Nandini Dey, Šumit Ganguly, Anindita Adhikari, and Dinsha Mistree at roundtable discussion “The Troubling State of India’s Democracy” hosted by the University of Michigan’s Center for Emerging Democracies on September 12, 2023. Watch the event recording [here](#).

## Taking Stock of India’s Democracy

**Larry Diamond**, Stanford University; **Šumit Ganguly**, Indiana University, Bloomington; **Dinsha Mistree**, Stanford University

India is often celebrated as the world’s largest democracy, and for good reason. Next year nearly 1 billion people will be eligible to vote in India’s general election. State and local elections will also take place across much of the country, following predetermined schedules set by the Election Commission of India. Opposition parties will actively compete and will undoubtedly win control of many offices. Apart from its scale, Indian democracy has proven robust since the country’s Independence in 1947. Despite low levels of economic development, poverty on a massive scale, staggeringly complex social divisions, and anti-democratic pressures brought on by its neighboring countries, India’s democratic institutions have persisted for more than seven decades, with only a brief interruption between 1975 and 1977. Over this period, India’s leaders have respected the liberal norms associated with a healthy democracy, including the need for a free and independent media, the right to assembly and association, and providing considerable scope to express political dissent and protest.

Today, however, India’s status as the world’s largest democracy is rightly being called into question. India was recently downgraded from “free” to “partially free” by Freedom House, while the V-Dem Institute changed its classification of India from a “democracy” to an “electoral autocracy,” and the *Economist*’s Intelligence Unit downgraded India to a “flawed democracy” in its annual Democracy Index. Probing more deeply, a recent symposium in the *Journal of Democracy* asked, “Is India Still a Democracy?”

We do not intend to rehash the debate as to whether India should or should not be classified as a democracy. Setting aside this important conceptual exercise, the evidence to date suggests that India’s vibrant tradition of liberal democracy is under duress and is continuing to regress. We draw attention to three specific ways in which liberal democracy has come under threat:

1. The state is being reshaped to concentrate power in the executive at the expense of other important institutions;
2. State institutions are being used to advance an illiberal conception of Indian identity, which marginalizes those from minority religious communities; and

3. State institutions are increasingly used to harass political opposition, while civil liberties more generally are under pressure.

Although each of these assaults has its own respective lineage that can be traced back to India's founding moment, the quality of India's tradition of liberal democracy has deteriorated considerably since the election of a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in 2014. Despite these illiberal tendencies, the BJP has continued to win several important elections, including a stunning national reelection in 2019. Why has the BJP been so successful? What are the prospects—if any—for India to return to its liberal democratic ideals? How should India's own challenges be framed in the context of a larger global democratic recession? Democracy scholars must rise to the challenge of analyzing the threats confronting the world's largest democracy.

## Historical Background

Since its adoption of a democratic and secular Constitution in January 1950, India has faced a range of challenges to its democratic institutions and ethos (Khosla 2020). Quite early in the history of the republic, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, whose democratic credentials were mostly impeccable, had nevertheless been a party to several anti-democratic actions, including the imprisonment of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, the leader of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, and the dismissal of a legitimately elected Communist government in the state of Kerala in 1959 (Jeffrey 1991). However, the most egregious departure from democratic norms and procedures took place during the eighteen-month "state of emergency" that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared in 1975. During this period, the political opposition was squelched, civil rights and personal liberties were dramatically curtailed, the press censored, and the judiciary cowed (Prakash 2019). Since the restoration of Indian democracy with the crushing defeat of Indira Gandhi in the 1977 elections, India has remained continuously democratic. However, when faced with widespread civil unrest and also when fighting insurgencies, the Indian state has abridged civil liberties and has used legal means to limit the rights of habeas corpus (Ganguly 2017). Later, after returning to office in 1980, until her assassination in 1984, Indira Gandhi often resorted to dubious constitutional maneuvers to undermine legitimate opposition governments in various states (Brass 2015). Furthermore, India's commitment to civil rights and personal liberties has often been found wanting when dealing with domestic insurgencies. When tackling uprisings in Assam, Kashmir, and Punjab, along with

addressing the Maoist, Naxalite movement in various states, the Indian state has countenanced and abetted rampant violations of human rights.

While India has suffered outbreaks of violence and departures from democratic practice at the subnational level, it has not been unique in this regard, as other sizable emerging-market democracies like Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico have also faced such challenges. Yet, despite a range of challenges and shortcomings, democracy has endured in India. This is no small achievement given that scholars had held out little hope for the success of democracy in a desperately poor country,<sup>1</sup> and journalists had sounded the tocsin about its survival prospects with "fissiparous tendencies" rending the polity apart (Harrison 1960). Nevertheless, barring the anomalies that have been noted, none of these dire predictions have been borne out—until now.

## The Looming Challenge

Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in May 2014 and was re-elected to a second, five-year term in April 2019. During his tenure, Modi and the BJP have maintained overwhelming majority control in the Lok Sabha, India's lower and more powerful house of Parliament. The BJP has also won several important state elections. The BJP's ability to dominate the political arena is due in no small part to the utter disarray within the Indian National Congress, which controlled Indian politics for decades after Independence and has been the only other party in India's history to demonstrate electoral strength nationwide. Its successive defeats in the 2014 and 2019 general (national) elections were both decisive. The party has proven to be leaderless, it has failed to provide a viable alternative governing agenda, and it has sought to make subtle appeals to India's Hindu majority, all without making any meaningful national electoral headway. Despite its abject lack of leadership, the Congress Party remains wedded to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty with Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the family, and his mother, Sonia Gandhi, still the cynosure within the party. While there have been a few notes of dissent, no frontal challenge to their dominance appears to be in the offing. The small hints of dissent have, for the most part, been contained (Sen 2020). The BJP, quite understandably, has exploited this lack of a meaningful opposition in pursuit of its ideological agenda.

Although India's tradition of elections remains largely free and fair—as reaffirmed by the BJP's state election setbacks in 2021 and in Karnataka in 2023—the BJP's

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these misgivings, see Ganguly 2007.

ideological agenda unfortunately runs counter to India's liberal democratic traditions in several important respects. Consider how Prime Minister Modi has altered institutions to concentrate power in his office, far beyond what his predecessors attempted, or even envisioned. Over the past ten years, Modi and the BJP have strengthened the Prime Minister's Office, refused to recognize a Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, sidelined certain bureaucratic agencies for political reasons, repeatedly challenged the independence of the courts, and weakened states' rights, particularly for states with opposition leadership. Far from denying these charges, Modi and the BJP have repeatedly campaigned on these tactics as necessary to deliver what voters want.

Modi and the BJP have utilized this mostly unchecked power to further several anti-secular political projects. More specifically, they pursue policies that are meant to recognize India as a country for Hindus, and one that is hostile toward Muslims and other religious minorities. This pursuit of *Hindutva*<sup>2</sup> is not just about redefining what it means to be Indian, but it is also a project of asserting a more aggressive and political form of what it means to be a Hindu. As the BJP prepares for general elections in May 2024, many observers expect ethnic violence to increase.

Perhaps most concerning for democracy scholars, the Indian state is being used to curtail political rights. Today when Indians express opinions that run counter to the official narrative, they have to be concerned about the consequences. Journalists have been stigmatized, scholars have lost their jobs, university students have been attacked, think tanks have faced harassment from tax officials, and rival politicians have found themselves disqualified from office due to spurious legal charges.

### Framing the Scholarly Debate

Scholars broadly agree that the quality of India's liberal democracy has regressed considerably over the past ten years. Two contending strains of scholarship have emerged as to what is driving this transition. The first maintains that Modi and the BJP are thrusting an anti-liberal ideology on the population. The underlying premise is that if Modi did not exist or if the BJP were not as powerful, India's trajectory as a liberal democracy would have remained healthy. In his book, *Modi's India* (2021), Christophe Jaffrelot convincingly

<sup>2</sup> The term *Hindutva* literally means "Hinduness." The BJP and its intellectual antecedents, however, had appropriated this term and made it an integral part of its ideology. See the discussion in Anderson and Longkumar 2018.

argues that Modi's charisma and political shrewdness have played a critical role in steering India toward an ethnic democracy. In similar work, Tariq Thachil (2014) highlights how the BJP buys support from dissident voters with social services provided by its grassroots affiliates. These voters do not necessarily want a strong leader or *Hindutva*. Analyses by Ganguly, Tudor, and Yadav all suggest that Modi and the BJP are orchestrating a top-down dismantling of India's liberal democracy.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, this strain finds strong resonance with scholars observing democratic decline in other parts of the world. As populist leaders have gained power in many parts of the world, democracy theorists have suggested that illiberal leaders take similar steps to seize control of their societies. In other countries, the death of democracy has come at the hands of elected democrats themselves through a process of incremental assaults on essential democratic institutions and norms that one of us has labeled "the autocrats' twelve-step program" (Diamond 2019, 64–65). Typically, the process is led by populist political leaders who portray their opponents in politics and society as not simply wrong or misguided but rather as enemies of the "the people." The populist appeal is polarizing, anti-elitist, anti-institutionalist, and xenophobic. Populists promise to defend the good, deserving people against arrogant, corrupt elites and dangerous others who betray or threaten the country. Illiberal populists target vulnerable groups—immigrants and religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities—anyone who stands outside the exclusive construction of what constitutes the nation, and against the hegemonic project of the populist party. They also seek to sever any foreign partnerships that do not advance the ends of the ruling party.

A second set of scholarship suggests that India's illiberal turn is due to factors that are larger than Modi or the BJP. Instead, Modi and the BJP are merely symptoms of a governing system and a society that are inclined toward illiberalism and majoritarianism. As Ashutosh Varshney (1993) argued nearly three decades ago, there has long been a "politics of anxiety" amongst a component of the Hindu electorate, leading them to question the value of Indian secularism. Although the BJP is only about forty years old, it brings together a chain of strong nationalist and religious movements that have existed for more than 100 years in India. And well before Modi was a contender on the national stage, scholars recognized the "saffron wave" as a challenge to India's secular mores. Accordingly, one cannot discount the possibility that Indian voters

<sup>3</sup> See the *Journal of Democracy's* special issue, "Is India Still a Democracy?" (July 2023).

prefer a strong leader who prioritizes the religious majority over others. In this vein, Modi and the BJP have opportunistically sought to give the voters what they want. More recently, Chhibber and Verma (2018) and Verma (2023) provide compelling survey evidence that Indian citizens express satisfaction with their democracy. Even those who oppose Modi and the BJP for ideological reasons still seem to believe in the quality of India's democracy.

Are Modi and the BJP thrusting an anti-liberal ideology on the population? Or are Modi and his circle simply responding to what they perceive to be a demand from the electorate? If it is the former, then Modi and the BJP are actively driving divisiveness, possibly for ideological or electoral gain. If the latter is instead true, then Modi's agency is not as relevant: voters would turn to some other politician or party who could provide "strong leadership" centered on a *Hindutva* agenda.

The true answer is only likely to reveal itself in hindsight. Going into general (national) elections in 2024, Modi enjoys strong popularity, and many pundits expect the BJP to return to power. Part of this popularity may be due to communitarian politics, but Modi and the BJP can also point to governing successes that have taken place since 2014. A leading opposition politician, Shashi Tharoor, concedes that the Modi government has improved India's woeful physical infrastructure, has expanded the social safety net for India's poorest, has embraced technology and e-governance, and has sought to strengthen India's diplomacy. It is very difficult to ascertain how the electorate weighs these governance successes with the broader onslaught against liberal democracy.

Democracy observers should also keep a close eye on the machinery of India's electoral democracy. Although organizations like the Election Commission are still widely considered to be credible and effective, changes in liberal democratic practices can often be accompanied by threats to electoral practices. A recent working paper by Das suggests discrepancies in close district races in the 2019 general elections, possibly the result of local election tampering. Scholars have an important role to play in investigating whether this pattern repeats in 2024, or factors into other state- and local outcomes. And after changing the Indian Constitution to bring Jammu and Kashmir in line with India's other states, there have been no announcements of an election scheduled in this region, as various political figures have been detained.

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## How Redefined Indian-ness Drives India’s Democratic Decline

*Maya Tudor, University of Oxford*

India’s democracy has entered a new era of decline. For many decades, India’s democracy was a beacon of hope around the world that democracy could grow roots in diverse and poor soil. Low-quality though its democracy was, India was the only country in South Asia to receive Freedom House’s (FH) designation of “Free.” India’s elections were described as free and meaningfully determining access to political power, even if marred by pervasive criminality, corruption, and decrepit state institutions. But in 2021, all democracy watchdogs, including FH, designated India as “Partly Free” for the first time since India’s Emergency, joining its South Asian neighbours in either the partial or fully authoritarian designation.

India’s changing national identity has not just accompanied, but critically enabled, its democratic decline. A dominant *e pluribus unum* conception of India, rhetorically embracing linguistic and religious diversity since the country’s founding, has been palpably transformed into one dominantly defined by a particular vision of Hinduism. Exactly how and why does this matter for democracy? A national narrative predominantly defined by an immutable identity, such as ethnicity, race or religion, has direct and debilitating consequences for democracy. In particular, I argue that the popular acceptance of ascriptive nationalism enables democratic decline through three mechanisms—mainstreaming majoritarianism; polarizing pluralists; and accumulating authority. These three mechanisms reveal when and how nationalism can endanger democracy. And all three are in evidence in India today.

## India’s *E Pluribus Unum* National Narrative

Hindu nationalism is not only India’s dominant national narrative today, but also the fundamental currency of its contemporary politics (Yadav 2019). Yet it was not always so. Paradoxically, India’s Congress party, a hundred years ago the inventor of Indian nationalism, is today not identified as a nationalist movement at all. How did this transformation happen? How did a vocal but ultimately marginal understanding of the Indian nation become its very definition?

India’s dominant national narrative for its early post-independence decades was created by its anti-colonial movement, the Indian National Congress. At the start of mass engagement in nationalist politics in the 1920s, Congress propagated a national identity that was thin but inclusive by the standards of any nationalist movement across the post-colonial world. Congress-defined Indian nationalism was pluralist with respect to three social cleavages that impeded an inclusive national narrative in much of the post-colonial world: religion, language, and class mobilization (Tudor 2013).

*Religiously*, Congress’s commitment to a distinctive kind of egalitarian nationalism was evident in its decisions to both create a public sphere where one’s identity was not defined by religion and to create a nation not defined by Hinduism. *Linguistically*, Congress’s nationalism was also plural in a country that spoke over a thousand languages and in which upwards of thirty languages were spoken by one million people or more. Though it was an elite and relatively thin narrative (Mylonas and Tudor 2023) (being defined in the minds of ordinary Indians as primarily anti-colonial), this egalitarian conception of Indian national identity remained largely unchallenged during the country’s first two decades as a sovereign democracy.

During early Congress rule, India hewed closely to the espoused ideals of the nationalist movement in its political and economic decision-making, and pluralist conceptions of the nation continued to predominate. During the 1960s and 1970s, the dissolving of the nationalist movement’s support structure and the rise of opposition forces marked the transition to a new political system, but one that did not yet challenge the *e pluribus unum* character of India’s national identity. Over time, however, popular unrest grew as the structural inequalities baked into Congress’ support structure broke out into the open. This culminated in the Congress split of 1969, Indira Gandhi’s win in the 1971 national elections, and her 1975 Emergency declaration, a thinly disguised auto-golpe rhetorically justified in order to protect Indian secularism (Baloch 2021).



When Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, the dominance of India's pluralist nationalism began to fracture as she consequently began to flirt with Hindu nationalism. Consequently, some politicians and political parties began to strategically employ the language of Hindu nationalism for electoral gain. The social base of the Congress party began to dissolve as caste-based parties arose demanding greater recognition of subordinate social groups. Voters committed to a politics of recognition transferred their support to regional parties who better represented their views, while those opposing the politics of recognition transferred their support to the BJP (Chhibber and Verma 2018). The fracturing of Congress' support structure thus gave rise to an era of coalition governments. It was in this context that the BJP first came to national power in 1996, albeit in coalition government and without the mass mobilization of its affiliated grassroots organizations. The 2014 and 2019 elections, however, presaged a new era of BJP party dominance that was fundamentally enabled by the rise of Hindu nationalism.

### The Rise of Nativist Nationalism

The winning political strategy of current Prime Minister Narendra Modi has always been to foreground economic development and background Hindu nationalism, allowing his party to exploit religious tensions when doing so proves electorally fruitful. As a Chief Minister, Modi had popularized the Gujarat model of development, which purportedly promoted private sector-led growth and minimized corruption. Though economic growth did not often translate into commensurate development (Sud 2020), the aspirational promise of replicating the Gujarat model of growth across India convinced many to cast their vote for Modi—who as a member of a middle caste was himself emblematic of the middle castes' aspirations for mobility (Sridharan 2014). In the run-up to the 2014 election, Modi underplayed explicitly polarizing *Hindutva* language in favor of a broader celebration of the Indian nation (Pal, Mistree, and Madhani 2018). Many younger Indians who did not agree with *Hindutva* “held their noses” to vote for Modi in the hopes that India would unleash a developmental revolution (Chhibber and Verma 2019).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, *Hindutva* was coined by Sarvarkar in 1923. It refers to those living in the geographical space known as the Indian subcontinent in terms of an ethnic group with a single culture. Politically, this ethnic conception of the nation has been promulgated by a set of organizations collectively known as the Sangh Parivar (BJP, RSS, and the Vishva Hindu Parishad).

Though development and clean governance were more prominent in the 2014 campaign, Hindu nationalism was selectively propagated in regions where doing so would reap electoral benefits. During the election's most visible speeches, Modi invariably wore saffron-colored clothing, the color of Hinduism. He typically prayed at Hinduism's sacred spots before attending election rallies, often in the company of Hindu priests. Modi's speeches on the campaign trail were peppered throughout with Hindu references. He contested his electoral seat from Varanasi, the spiritual heart of Hinduism. The BJP election manifesto declared that it would search for “all possibilities within the framework of the Constitution to facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya,” an issue which sparked nationwide religious riots in 1992, in which nearly 3,000 people died.<sup>2</sup> Across Mumbai, billboards proclaimed, “I am a patriot. I am a Hindu nationalist” (*India Today* 2013).

But in places where religious polarization would effectively reap political dividends at the polls, Modi's campaign went even further. For example, it charged the incumbent Congress government with promoting cow slaughter, an offensive act to Hinduism that he termed a “pink revolution” (Blachand 2014). In Muzaffarnagar, communal riots—which gave the BJP an electoral benefit—were stoked. This strategy—emphasizing development, and selectively invoking *Hindutva*—worked, and the BJP came to power armed with the first national single-party majority in decades. Electorally, its 2014 win signalled that the BJP “replaced the Congress as the system-defining party and became the focal point of electoral alignments and realignments with parties forming coalitions solely to oppose the BJP” (Ibid, 246).

Though Modi and many central BJP politicians have pursued a strategy of plausible deniability, Hindu nationalism has taken root in three inter-related policy domains that have moved beyond symbolic discourse: *educational curricula reform*, *cow protection*, and *citizenship laws*. The first and perhaps most import domain through which Indian-ness is fusing with Hinduism is the BJP-sponsored *reimagining of Indian history* to glorify Hinduism's authenticity and achievements, while minimizing non-Hindu contributions. India's national identity is not just being articulated in a new way but also disseminated broadly throughout Indian society in ways that perceptibly alter the boundaries of the national “we.” The elevation of Hinduism as the defining feature of the Indian nation and

<sup>2</sup> BJP Election Manifesto 2014. Accessed online at [http://www.bjp.org/images/pdf\\_2014/full\\_manifesto\\_english\\_07.04.2014.pdf](http://www.bjp.org/images/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf)

the minimization of secular symbols and leaders is occurring at an alarming rate. The depth of alterations is substantial, with the *Indian Express* calculating that between 2014 and 2018, 1,334 changes were made to the 182 textbooks produced by the National Council of Educational Research Training, the chief federal body for schooling (Chopra 2018).

A second domain through which the Hindu character of India's national identity has been elevated is the trumpeting of cow protection laws. Notably, such laws already exist in many parts of India because of the animal's sanctity in Hinduism and have consistently received widespread support from broad segments of Indian society. But Modi's BJP has frequently raised the prominence and vehemence of cow protection on the political agenda. The BJP has encouraged the public to see the Hindu state as deserving protection, in contrast to a previous government that pandered more to "minorityism." The charge that cow protection bans are not enforced heightens the salience of an issue that primarily targets the livelihoods of ethnic minorities. As BJP politicians have consistently and stridently argued that the state should better protect cows, this rhetoric has translated into action, with vigilante groups spearheading violence. Between January 2009 and October 2018, at least 91 people were killed and 579 were injured in cow protection attacks. Ninety percent of these attacks were reported after BJP came to power in May 2014, and 66 percent occurred in BJP-run states. Muslims were victims in 62 percent of the cases and Christians in 14 percent (Human Rights Watch 2019).

The third and most direct domain through which Indian-ness is being equated with Hindu-ness is a range of laws seeking to legally enshrine Hindus as first-class citizens. Taken together, the August 2019 National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have formed the heart of this endeavour. A national register of citizens was already stipulated in the northeastern state of Assam after the state's first post-independence census in 1951. Because the region had historically seen fluid migration and because state documentation was not common practice in earlier post-independence decades, many citizens were unable to readily prove their citizenship when the Supreme Court ordered Assam's NRC to proceed in 2013, and the results were published in August 2019. Such major problems notwithstanding, the Modi government announced that it would create a National Register of Citizens. Shortly thereafter, with its even larger national electoral victory in hand, Modi's BJP government passed the CAA, which effectively introduced a legal preference for non-Muslim citizens by giving minorities from neighbouring Muslim-

majority countries an expedited path to citizenship. This law translates changing ideas of citizenship into institutional pillars of the polity.

### Hindu Nationalism and India's Diminished Democracy: Three Causal Logics

India's democracy is dying today (Tudor 2023). The analytic focus of arguments describing India's democratic decline has chronicled the rise of nationalism and deficits of liberalism without delineating the logic of how these phenomena relate to each other. Liberalism specifies that the state should be a fully neutral arbiter of individual rights without expressing any cultural preferences for identities. Nationalism prioritizes group rights such as the right to political self-determination and the defense of the national interest. But it can also prioritize the rights of national identities over religious ones by, for example, forcing citizens not to wear Muslim headscarves in schools, as France does. And a robust definition of democracy denotes both a set of institutional procedures such as elections, as well as a set of civil liberties that render such procedures meaningful.

Most democracies are not fully liberal, with governments often celebrating distinctive national cultures and histories. It is important to recognize this is not intrinsically problematic for democracy. But democracy is diminished when illiberalism or nationalism lead to the systematic deprivation of civil and political liberties. Indeed, the rollback of such liberties rather than the halting of elections is the modal way in which democracies are backsliding today. So how exactly does the rise of an ascriptive national narrative help diminish democracy? This causal logic deserves greater attention, since scholars of nationalism have long noted that nationalism is a "thin" identity which can readily combine with a range of ideologies, both liberalism and illiberalism, or multiculturalism and racism.

The first mechanism through which national narratives can undermine democracy is the mainstreaming of majoritarianism. When the celebration of a national identity creates systematic pressures to either diminish institutional constraints on democratic checks or to undermine the rights of individuals, democracy is diminished. When the immutable identity of a majority comes to centrally define a nation, political leaders are readily able to marginalize minorities with the broad support of the public by tacitly drawing upon legitimating historical narratives. And when political leaders are able to institutionalize such marginalization into laws and systemic practices, democracy, itself

defined by the guarantee of rights to assemble and rhetorically dissent, diminishes. If a nation is defined by a diverse set of groups that are rhetorically conceptualized as equal citizens, then there is no *generalized* political rationale for targeting groups on the basis of their minority status. But when immutable identities come to centrally define a nation, it becomes easier for political leaders to quash the rights and resources of citizens without the central immutable identity on the grounds that national ideals legitimate a lesser treatment of these groups.<sup>3</sup>

A second mechanism through which ascriptive nationalism can undermine democracy is *polarizing pluralists*. Leaders seeking to popularize an ascriptive national identity often silence moderate voices by labelling all defenders of pluralism as lacking sufficient ideological commitment to the ascriptive nation. Especially in a context where the dominant national identity is pluralist, the popularization of a more ascriptive national identity requires making a politics of identity politically salient. The invocation of fixed identity under threat, i.e., an “us versus them” cleavage, is the surest means of elevating identity politics. In the case of an ascriptive nationalism, the demarcation between the us and them is often clearer (signified by dress, geography, or skin color) than when principles and creeds encourage individuals to more readily profess allegiance to ideals.

In the case of external threats to the nation, citizens typically “rally around the flag,” and the ensuing national solidarity is a battery that can power sacrifice for the common good. When such identity threats are created domestically in the form of social groups, a polarizing rhetoric collapses multiple cleavages into a single overarching identity cleavage—one which simultaneously serves to both unite groups vested in that identity and undermine “out-groups.” A particularly successful strategy is to link domestic enemies with foreign enemies, one that has been successfully used by southern conservatives in the United States to link civil rights activists to communists and by Viktor Orban’s Hungary to link domestic critics to liberal elites such as George Soros. In the case of India, minorities are often accused of supporting Pakistan (Filkins 2019).

In India, the rise of anti-nationalism as a label in political discourse since the election of the Modi government is the clearest indication that this dynamic is at work. The very possibility of simultaneously being

loyal to the nation and critical of government policies or actions is increasingly oxymoronic. Protesting government actions on entirely legal grounds—for example, that laws or practices violate core tenets of the Constitution—serves as no barrier to being labelled anti-national. In the 2020 Delhi elections, for example, the Aam Aadmi Party ran on an anti-corruption and public services delivery platform, while the BJP primarily campaigned on a platform that voting for AAP was anti-national.

A third mechanism through which ascriptive nationalism, when combined with populism, can undermine democracy is *accumulating authority*. Together, the combination of ascriptive nationalism and populist appeals can allow elected leaders to more readily centralize power so as to protect the authentic ascriptive nation. Populist rhetoric definitionally positions a people, the true voice of the democracy, as impeded by a corrupt and out-of-touch elite. Ascriptive nationalism suggests that the national community is defined by an immutable social group. When combined, populist and ascriptive nationalist appeals suggest both that the ascriptive group is the “true” people and that only the leader can protect that ascriptively-defined people from the corrupt elite. The core problem addressed by populism—that the corrupt elite impede change through their control of institutions—is solved by sweeping away institutional constraints such as courts or the bureaucracy. Because these institutions are “captured” by a corrupt elite, the leader is justified in circumventing such institutions to pursue the will of the people. Through this logic, the leader is justified in defying important norms that serve as the “guardrails” of democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), as well as most institutional checks on the government’s power.

## Conclusion

For the seventy years since independence in 1947, India defied the statistical odds that diversity and poverty would imperil its democracy. It did so by developing a well-organized dominant party that espoused an inclusive national narrative (which was unusual among post-colonial countries). Over time, this imperfect and improbable democracy not only endured but deepened. The dominance of its nationalist party, the Indian National Congress, has given way to a two-party system that institutionalized competition; regional movements representing lower-caste groupings have diversified the face of political life; and even India’s darkest democratic hour to date—the 22-month Emergency—resulted in a resounding defeat for the incumbent Indira Gandhi government.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparative exploration of how this has been done in India, Germany, and the United States, see Wilkerson 2020.

To be sure, this democracy brokered too little genuine development. Yet, while democracy is no guarantee of development, a wealth of evidence suggests that on balance, democracies do better on not just economic growth (Acemoglu *et al.* 2019), but on ultimately translating that growth into human development (Dahlum and Knutsen 2017). Such broad empirical patterns have been borne out in South Asia where, of her neighbours inheriting the same challenges of poverty, diversity, and centuries of colonial plunder, India does better than most on human development, outranking Pakistan, Nepal, and Myanmar. Those achievements are under threat today because India as a nation is increasingly defined by a religious identity that legitimizes minority marginalization, promotes public polarization, and centralizes a great degree of power in its prime minister. Consequently, India's democracy is dying.

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## Will India Realize Its Economic Promise? The Implications of Modi's Politicization of India's Economic Governance

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The Modi government widely touts the success of its economic development policies. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman triumphantly declared:

India's GDP has reached \$3.75 trillion in 2023, from around \$2 trillion in 2014; moving from 10th largest to the fifth largest economy in the world. India is now being called a Bright Spot in the global economy.

Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran proudly proclaimed that India will become the third-largest economy by 2027 (*Financial Express* 2023). These facts reflect commendable accomplishments, but they obscure one of the most important developments resulting from Modi's economic policies: the politicization of India's economic governance to build support for an increasingly personalistic regime experiencing democratic backsliding and growing inequality.

In a democracy, economic policies generating disproportionate benefits for the wealthy create a challenge of gaining electoral support from the excluded masses. Prior to the ascendance of Modi, Atul Kohli observed that India's political leaders responded to this challenge through two institutional changes. First, they created a "two-track polity, with an electoral track and an economic governance track separated from each other" (Kohli 2012, 60–68). In the electoral track, politicians searched for "legitimizing narratives"—such as Hindu nationalism, caste politics, charismatic leadership, and populism—to secure popular support without imperiling class hierarchy. The economic governance track insulated technocratic policymakers from popular politics. Decentralization was the second institutional change. The growing importance of private sector investment and the decline in the share of central government investments elevated the relative importance of state governments' policymaking authority. Constitutional amendments in the 1990s further decentralized authority to local governments. Kohli asserts that this decentralization has empowered

private interests to appropriate resources for their personal benefit, while enabling national-level leaders to claim credit for popular policies and blame state and local governments for implementation failures.

We contend that analyzing how Modi has altered the two-track model is essential to understanding India's economic performance under his government. We show that Modi has politicized the economic governance track while also bringing changes to the electoral track; both affect India's long-term growth prospects.

### Modi's Inconsistent Policy Mix

Modi led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition to landslide electoral victories in 2014 and 2019, providing it with the autonomy necessary to implement its policies. Many expected Modi to be a liberalizer who would, according to his own campaign slogan, bring "minimum government, maximum governance." Others, who more closely inspected Modi's rule in Gujarat, were less convinced that Modi would liberalize, but felt that with his mandate, he would at a minimum focus on increasing the rate of growth. Some critics drew attention to Gujarat's uneven social development record as well. No one, however, predicted the inconsistent policy mix implemented by Modi since 2014.

The Modi government's policies have been market-affirming in several areas—bankruptcy, the goods and services tax, the India Stack, labor, and agriculture. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (2016) boosted India's economic dynamism by helping to develop the country's market for distressed assets, liberating assets from defaulting and zombie firms, and alleviating the stress on banks created by bad loans. The 2017 Goods and Services Tax advanced the creation of a national market by replacing myriad state tax codes with a single Value Added Tax (VAT). The India Stack initiative promoted financial inclusion and market dynamism by providing firms with access to government-supported application programming interfaces (API). These interfaces provide a digital public good so that firms can build apps with access to government-issued personal IDs, payment networks, and data to provide consumer services for everything from welfare payments, digital transactions, to loans. In 2021, the government used India Stack facilities to make \$66 billion in direct payments to government beneficiaries, and India's digital payments system processed 260 million transactions daily for a total annual value of \$22.3 trillion. The agricultural reforms forced through Parliament in 2020 would have also liberalized the market for agricultural goods,

but strong farmer opposition compelled the Modi government to revoke the legislation. The reforms passed in September 2020 liberalized India's complex and archaic labor laws. Agricultural and labor reforms, as well as the slashing of the corporate tax rate to 25%, show that, in many cases, Modi's economic liberalization shifts the power to business at the expense of labor and farmers.

The Modi government's economic policy has been market-repressive in other areas. Modi's high-profile "Make in India" initiative has packaged increased tariff protection, production-linked incentive schemes, and public infrastructure investment to promote Indian manufacturing and exports. Modi's November 2016 demonetization intervention mandated the precipitous withdrawal of 86% of Indian currency, inflicting widespread disruption of India's extensive informal sector. At the same time, the Modi government has intervened in markets to favor politically supportive firms like the Adani group and Reliance Jio (see below).

### Modi's Politicization of the Economic Governance Track

While Modi's reforms lack a consistent policy orientation, they signal that policies have increasingly become vehicles to promote the Prime Minister's political interests. The Modi government has marginalized technocratic policymakers while centralizing and politicizing decision-making in the governance track. It has shifted technocratic experts out of key central government decision-making positions and replaced them with politically loyal officials. It has asserted political control over institutions like the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the judicial system, and India's institutional system for providing economic statistics. Such centralization impedes policy initiatives requiring technical expertise and liberalization. All of this has led to a decision-making style that is peremptory, personalized, publicity-seeking, and credit-claiming.

Modi came into office promising to re-balance economic policymaking by drawing the states into a discussion about the character of national development. The replacement of the Planning Commission (said to have been too didactic) with the NITI Aayog (NA) was a move in this direction. The NA was supposed to allow state governments more influence over the national agenda for planning by providing a forum where they would meet each other and policy planners on more equal terms. However, the Modi government has sidelined the NA. Central policy makers have ignored its reports, and unlike the previous Planning Commission, the NA has

no control over spending allocations (Aiyar and Tillin 2020, 127–8). The marginalization of NA's influence in New Delhi reflects a more general centralization of decision-making authority.

On the 2014 campaign trail, Modi criticized the UPA government for "policy paralysis" and promised more decisive governance. Once in office, he involved himself personally with economic policymaking. He chaired meetings in which senior civil servants from relevant ministries outlined policies and projects. Modi also supervised the implementation of favored policies, participating in long review meetings. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) became an important location for decision making and policy design. This close supervision and tight control of policy also enabled economic policies to mesh more closely with the political objectives of the BJP government. The days when a finance minister in the UPA could hold the Prime Minister at arm's length are gone. Under Modi's leadership, decision making has been concentrated in the PMO, reducing the autonomy of the Finance Minister, and there has been heavy emphasis on using government schemes that establish a close connection between the central government—and indeed the Prime Minister himself—and voters.

Demonetization—the withdrawal of 86% of India's circulating currency—epitomized the centralization of policymaking and Modi's confidence in his own judgment over that of conventional experts. This approach to combating corruption by rooting out "black money" had failed in its earlier attempts and was widely discredited among most economists, including those at the central bank, the RBI (Rajan 2017). Modi was undaunted by the critiques, and he used the initiative to show his decisive leadership. The surprise implementation of demonetization on November 8, 2016 imposed social costs that far outweighed its benefits. The value of black income—historically generated through tax evasion—removed from the economy was minuscule. According to the RBI, 99% of the invalidated banknotes were exchanged with India's banks, and within a year, the amount of currency in circulation had returned to its pre-demonetization level (Reserve Bank of India 2017). Demonetization was responsible for up to 3.5 million lost jobs and a 15-million-person reduction in the labor force, according to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE) (*Financial Express* 2018). Industrial growth dropped from 5.6% in the two quarters from April through October 2016 to just 2.8 % in the following twelve months, and GDP growth declined from 7.5% in the quarter ending

on September 30, 2016, to just 6.1% in the quarter beginning January 2017 and 5.7% in the quarter beginning March 2017 (Ramakumar 2018, pp. 23, 29).

The Modi government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is another example of its capricious policy interventions. On March 24, 2020, it suddenly imposed an extensive lockdown. Modi announced the crackdown without consulting public health experts, state governments, or parliamentary leaders. Indeed, Modi preempted parliamentary debate on the lockdown by ending the ongoing session the day before his announcement. The sudden lockdown stranded tens of millions of urban migrant workers without livelihoods. Since all transportation was shut down, millions of the workers journeyed hundreds of miles to their villages on foot and bicycles until the government finally authorized emergency trains to transport them. The government relief package was woefully inadequate. The economy plunged 24% from April through June 2020, among the world's steepest declines (Ministry of Finance 2020, pp. 5,6,13).

Political support for Modi has remained high despite the widespread suffering. Not having paid a political price for its response to the first COVID wave, the government inadequately prepared for the second. It had signed contracts to export millions of vaccine doses, but as of mid-February 2021, it ordered only enough vaccines to protect 3% of India's population. Against the warnings of health experts, the BJP permitted the public celebration of the Kumbh Mela in April, a Hindu festival that gathered millions of pilgrims over a month, and it held massive election rallies with no social distancing and virtually no masks. India's second COVID wave hit in the middle of March 2021. According to official statistics, the surge produced more than 380,000 daily cases by the end of April—almost certainly a substantial undercount. India experienced widespread oxygen shortages, inciting urgent government pleas for foreign supplies. Indian companies were obliged to renege on their vaccination export contracts and produce for the Indian public. On April 19, 2021, Modi announced that the government would make vaccines available to all Indians above the age of 18 by May 1. India's vaccine production increased, and by March 2023, 74.4% of the population have received at least one dose (Johns Hopkins 2023).

The Modi government appears to use its centralized control over economic governance to favor politically supportive firms while threatening businesses that diverge from its political line with raids by investigative agencies (Khanna 2023). The Adani Group, politically aligned with Modi since his days as Chief Minister of

Gujarat, secured all six government contracts for airport privatization. It has become the largest mine operator for Coal India and has won numerous contracts in city gas distribution and highway construction.

As Chandra and Walton (2020) note, the Adani Group has won most of its contracts through competitive bidding. However, its ties to Modi are a valuable asset in securing contracts and accessing capital not available to less politically connected firms. Reliance Jio has been another Modi favorite. Though it entered the telecom sector as a full-service provider only in 2016, after a series of favorable regulatory decisions (Block 2019), it emerged as India's biggest telecom company with a 43.3% revenue market share in June 2022 (Parbat 2022). The Adani and Reliance groups are sophisticated, globally competitive enterprises that arguably could be groomed as "national champions." However, at a time of increasing overall industrial concentration and high tariffs (Acharya 2023), their rapidly growing market power could also stifle competition and innovation while highlighting rent-seeking as an effective strategy for economic advancement.

The management of information since 2014 reflects the political ambitions of the Modi government. Heavy emphasis has been placed on relaying positive news. The method of calculating growth in GDP was altered in January 2015 in a move that continues to be criticized. The new method reflected favorably on the economic performance of the Modi government as it has produced higher growth figures. In 2019, Arvind Subramanian, the Chief Economic Advisor from 2014 to 2018, estimated that rather than the official growth rate of 7% from 2011-12 to 2016-17, India's actual growth rate was about 4.5% (Subramanian 2019). The government embargoed unflattering unemployment data in the year before the 2019 elections, leading to the resignation of the head of the National Statistical Commission. It did not release the data until after the elections. Data sources such as Annual Employment-Unemployment Surveys (EUS) have been discontinued, leaving analysts more dependent on sources like the Periodic Labour Force Survey with more questionable reliability and which are more susceptible to manipulation (Raj and Misra 2022). The Consumption Expenditure Survey (CES)—the basis of calculating poverty estimates—has not been published since 2011. In the years prior to the reforms introduced in the 2021-22 budget, the Modi government took measures to obscure the weakness of its fiscal position. The size of the fiscal deficit has been queried by the Comptroller and Auditor General who estimated that the government had substantially understated the figures, projecting a deficit of 5.86% for 2017-18, instead of the 3.4% reported in official budget

papers (Nair 2020). The attempts to manipulate official data for political advantage have deprived policymakers of accurate information, making it more difficult to assess India's economic problems and devise effective solutions.

### The Electoral Track: Hindu Nationalism and the "New Welfarism"

Since 2014, Modi and the BJP have brought about three changes to the electoral track.

The NDA government increased the salience of majoritarian politics as the BJP and the RSS attempted to use their control of the political process to advance its project of *Hindutva* hegemony. This posed an unprecedented threat to collective and individual rights, as seen in the repressive termination of Kashmir's statehood, the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the increased frequency and severity of everyday violence against Muslims. The second major change was the careful construction of a charismatic image of Narendra Modi as a selfless, decisive, and devoted leader of the nation (Sircar 2020). The 2019 election demonstrated that Narendra Modi's political leadership was the BJP's most potent political resource. The third important change in the electoral track was how Modi and the NDA government changed India's social welfare policy.

In the 1990s, issues of caste and religious nationalism dominated the electoral track. From 2004 to 2014, the UPA government enacted a series of social welfare programs grounded on citizen rights, such as the right to work, information, education, and food security, generally expanding the role of policy in electoral politics. Poverty and the well-being of the needy were addressed through programs like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which aimed to provide 100 days of unskilled labor per year to the rural poor. The Modi government has reinvented and expanded social welfare policies, many of which originated under the previous government, in ways that prioritize distributing private goods such as cooking oil, bank accounts, and toilets to voters in a way that associates their tangible benefits directly with the Prime Minister. The onset of this "new welfarism" has not been accompanied by a dramatic increase in India's welfare spending. At 3% of GDP, India continues to spend much less than other large emerging markets such as Brazil and China, each spending 15% of GDP. Instead, the proliferation of these programs has occurred while spending on public goods remains under-prioritized. Individual families receive tangible private goods while information about broader social welfare is unavailable, representing a new strategy for building political

support rather than improving social welfare (Aiyar 2023).

### Conclusion

Our essay has assessed the Modi government's economic management from 2014–2022. We have focused our analysis on changes in India's two-track polity and the impact of those changes. We have shown that the Modi government has politicized India's economic governance, concentrating economic policymaking while marginalizing the role of experts. These measures have led to a series of capricious economic interventions and policies that have benefitted businesses that are long-time supporters of Modi. At the same time, India's industrial structure has become increasingly concentrated. Income and wealth inequality has grown, with the share of people at the bottom half of India's income distribution declining from 20.2% of the total in the 1980s to 13.2% in the 2010s. In comparison, the income of the top one percent increased from 9.9% to 21.74%, and the bottom half's share of wealth dropped from 10.9% to 6.1%; all while the wealth of the top 1% grew from 12.5% to 31.6% (Ghatak *et al.* 2023).

India's growth rate has been among the highest of the world's large economies since the pandemic, though the country's precipitous economic decline during the pandemic has inflated the apparent growth. It has reduced the substantial debt overhang that plagued its banking system in the 2010s and significantly increased its investment in physical and digital infrastructure, resulting in substantial upgrades (Nageswaran and Kaur 2023). However, it remains to be seen whether these changes will generate sufficiently widespread benefits to engender the structural changes necessary to support sustained rapid economic growth (Subramanian and Felman 2022). Understanding how Modi has politicized India's political economy offers insights into whether the world's most populous country will realize its economic promise.

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## Federalism and Center-State Relations

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A variety of trends—an aggressive Hindu nationalist agenda, violence against minorities, subjugation of institutions, erosion of civil liberties, crackdown on dissent, shrinking of the democratic space, breakdown of democratic norms, unhindered bigotry in public discourse, centralization of administration, and personalization of power—suggest that India under Narendra Modi and the BJP has been moving steadily towards competitive authoritarianism. Given this broader context, a key question emerges. What forces might potentially act as a check on India's slide towards competitive authoritarianism?<sup>1</sup> This article examines federalism in India in light of that broader concern and addresses the following questions: How has the interaction of federalism and democracy evolved over time in India? Can federalism act as a check on India's current political trends?

The article suggests that the dialectic of centralization and decentralization has been a long-running theme in Indian federalism. In formal terms, the constitutional design of Indian federalism has numerous features that tilt the balance of power firmly to the center over the states. Yet, the nature and practice of Indian federalism in different periods has diverged from the direction inherent in constitutional provisions; in some periods, center-state relations were more decentralized or centralized than the formal design of federalism would indicate. Whether Indian federalism assumed a more centralized or decentralized character has, in turn, depended on three contextual factors (see below).

In the case of the current regime, the BJP's electoral domination at the national level, its majoritarian ideology, and Modi's centralizing style of governance, personalization of power, and disregard of democratic norms, all enhance the inherent centripetal tendencies of Indian federalism. The practice of federalism since 2014 is consistent with the overall trend of democratic erosion. In and of themselves, constitutional mechanisms of federalism cannot act as a check on India's slide towards competitive authoritarianism. One potential avenue for change is greater electoral

<sup>1</sup> Several recent studies have characterized India as moving towards an illiberal or majoritarian democracy or as a hybrid regime. See for example, Chatterji, Blom Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019; Ganguly 2019; Ganguly 2020; Varshney 2019; Mukherji 2020; Tudor 2023; and Varshney 2022.

challenge to the BJP from regional parties. The conclusions here draw on and are broadly consistent with other analyses.<sup>2</sup>

### The Design vs. Practice of Indian Federalism: The Role of Contextual Factors

The constitutional design of Indian federalism imparts a clearly centralizing quality that is more reminiscent of unitary systems; various constitutional mechanisms tilt the balance between central and regional power firmly towards the center.<sup>3</sup> Despite the inherent centralizing design of the Indian constitution, the actual practice of federalism is influenced by three contextual factors: electoral competition, the ideology of the ruling party at the center, and the nature of leadership. The three contextual factors are related to and interact with each other.

Electoral competition matters in different ways.<sup>4</sup> Lower levels of party system fragmentation imply greater consolidation of power at the center, and this allows the party in power to control the national agenda. Alternatively, greater strength of regional parties allows state-level interests to be represented more strongly at the center, augments the autonomy of states vis-à-vis the center, and acts as a counter to the centralizing tendencies of federal design. Further, greater congruence of partisan identity between central and state governments results in fewer veto players who can counter the implementation of the national ruling party's agenda.

A second key factor that influences the practice of federalism is the ideology of the ruling party at the center—both political and economic.<sup>5</sup> A more centralizing political ideology such as Hindu nationalism is closely aligned with a unitary rather than a federal vision of the state (Aiyar and Tillin 2020). In contrast, a plural ideology favors accommodation and enhances the prospects for a more cooperative type of federalism. Economic ideology and framework also matter; centralized planning and state-led development have an affinity with unitary tendencies compared with market-oriented policies.

<sup>2</sup> Aiyar and Tillin 2020; Tillin 2018; Adeney and Bhattacharya 2018; Sharma and Swenden 2017; Manor 2001; Dasgupta 2001; Kohli 1997; Rudolph and Hoeber Rudolph 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Stepan 1999; Tillin 2016; Pal Singh 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Aiyar and Tillin 2020; Mitra and Pehl 2010; Tillin 2018.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Adeney and Bhattacharya 2018; Aiyar and Tillin 2020; Sharma and Swenden 2017; Tillin 2018.

Third, the nature of leadership and elite norms matter significantly.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not the leadership is accommodating is significant for bargaining prospects. A more centralized leadership style can also result in interference with state interests and affect the management of ethnic conflict.

### A Historical Overview of Federalism: 1947-2014

With a focus on electoral competition, party ideology, and leadership style, this section provides a brief overview of the politics of center–state relations in three periods—under Nehru, under Indira Gandhi, and between 1991 and 2014. In these three periods, the practice of federalism in India has fluctuated between being more centralized than its formal design in some periods and being more decentralized than the design in others.

#### *Center–State Relations under Nehru*

The imperatives of nation and state–building, as well as the mode of economic development, enhanced the centripetal tendencies of federalism under Nehru. However, the nature of the Congress Party (hereafter “Congress”), the dominant ideology, and Nehru’s leadership style all allowed for collaborative center–state relations. First, in terms of electoral competition, Congress was dominant at both the national and state levels until 1967. Congress had an organizational chain that stretched from the village to national level, and it relied considerably on the authority of “big men” at the local level to mobilize electoral support from marginalized groups below them in the social hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> In return, local intermediaries received patronage—offices, jobs, and public resources—from Congress. This dependence meant that local power acted to some degree as a constraint to central ambitions (Corbridge and Harriss 2000). In addition, the presence of factions within Congress meant the party’s mainstream ideology was consensual and accommodative, and factions provided checks and balances on overreach by a single leader or group (Kothari 1964).

Except for the extreme right and left, Congress housed numerous ideological strains within its fold. The dominant ideological make-up of the party at the national level, however, had Nehru’s clear imprint. On the economic side, India’s reliance on central planning

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Brass 1990; Dasgupta 2001; Hart 1988; Kohli 1997; Manor 2001.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Kohli 1990; Kothari 1970; Weiner 1967.

and state control meant that New Delhi was the central player in decision-making. On the political side, Nehru’s secular and pluralist conception of “unity in diversity,” as well as his emphasis on a strong center, formed the party’s core philosophy.

Nehru’s leadership style was one of accommodation (Brass 2005), most clearly evident in his management of linguistic demands. Fearing such demands would result in India’s break-up, he initially opposed linguistic mobilization. However, he relented, changed course, and agreed to linguistic reorganization after the agitation for a separate Telugu-speaking state gained momentum in 1952. Nehru was also willing to give state-level leaders space and did not interfere with subnational politics (Brass 2005 and Manor 2001).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there was both a strong democratic commitment and federal sensibility in his style of functioning (Mitra and Pehl 2010).

#### *The Indira Gandhi Era*

Indira Gandhi came to the helm in 1966, and, apart from a two-year period of Janata rule between 1977–1979, she would dominate the political landscape until 1984. Center–state relations were centralized and non-collaborative, consistent with Gandhi’s autocratic style of rule and personalization of power.

Overall party competition and changes internal to Congress itself are important in this period. By the mid-1960s, Congress’ nationalist legitimacy and its clientelist chains were weakening, leading to an erosion of authority links (Kohli 1990 and 2012). In turn, this created a vacuum of power that Indira Gandhi and others at the regional level filled through personalistic politics and populism. As seen in the 1967 elections, opposition parties also emerged in a significant fashion.

Within Congress, inter-elite accommodation and factional bargaining unravelled. The battles between Gandhi and the Syndicate, a group of regional power brokers, resulted in a split in Congress in 1969. The organizational basis of the party that Gandhi would lead would be much weaker after the split. Rather than rebuild party organization and create substantive citizen–party links, Gandhi relied on personalism as a substitute (Kochanek 1976 and Kohli 1990).

Ideologically, there were different phases in this era. Gandhi espoused a version of left-oriented populism from the late 1960s. Policies such as the nationalization

<sup>8</sup> The one notable exception is the dismissal of the Communist-led Kerala government in 1959.

of banks in 1969 reflected a clear leftward economic tilt. Rhetorically, she continued with Nehru's secular orientation. However, she encouraged religious forces for electoral gain towards the end of her term. There were even hints of an ideological shift to the right upon her return to power in 1980 (Kohli 2012 and 1990).

It is in terms of leadership that she differs most significantly from her father's modes of accommodation and reconciliation. Indira Gandhi's leadership was characterized by four central tendencies—centralization, deinstitutionalization, personalization of power, and a resort to authoritarian tactics. In the midst of a politically and economically challenging environment, she centralized decision-making in both Congress and government, and her personal authority replaced democratic processes (Kochanek 1976). She subverted internal party democracy and took control of appointments within Congress, reshuffling her cabinet often, interfering with state-level appointments and processes, and appointing only those she favored.

Even more notable was her interference and politicization of institutions such as federalism, parliament, and the office of the President, which had critical consequences for India's long-term democratic health. Her most brazen tactic was to get a pliant President, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, to declare the Emergency in 1975 in the midst of mounting opposition to her rule. She also actively installed and removed chief ministers and state leaders based on her preferences. Especially consequential was her role in exacerbating several ethnic and regional conflicts, including Punjab and Assam.

In sum, Gandhi's motivations, style of leadership, and subversion of norms resulted in federalism having an even more centralized quality than what is implied in the design of the Indian constitution.

### ***The Era of Political Fragmentation and Economic Liberalization (1991–2014)***

India simultaneously witnessed seminal changes on economic, political, and social fronts in the 1990s. Congress dominance gave way to a marked increase in party system fragmentation from 1989. No single party won a majority in parliament between 1989 and 2014, and coalition governments were in power between 1996 and 2014. The vote share in parliamentary elections of regional parties increased, and these parties became critical to coalition formation and stability. New political forces also emerged. After the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report in 1990, there was a dramatic transformation in lower caste political

participation, mobilization, and representation, which stood in contrast with clientelist mobilization of previous eras.<sup>9</sup> The 1990s also marked the electoral rise of the BJP and ascendancy of Hindu nationalism.

On the economic side, India's adoption of market reforms in 1991 signified a dramatic change from the country's inward-looking, state-directed economic framework that had been in place for the first three and a half decades after independence.<sup>10</sup> Economic liberalization importantly involved the marked decentralization of economic policy and power (Rudolph and Hoeber Rudolph 2001).

These consequential political and economic changes transformed federalism both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, political and economic trends reinforced each other, and center-state relations were much more decentralized than at any other point since independence. Horizontal change in federalism also ensued—inter-state economic competition became central to dynamics, and inter-state inequalities expanded greatly.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of contextual factors in the practice of federalism in this period is clear. The decentralization of power is very significantly linked to party system fragmentation and the onset of coalition politics. The onset of coalition politics also influenced the nature of leadership at the center. The very nature of coalition politics necessitated the centrality of bargaining, and various ruling parties and prime ministers at the center were automatically constrained from undertaking a unilateral agenda. Moreover, the leadership and norms of prime ministers between 1991 and 2014 were necessarily more consensual.

Ideology, too, was affected by coalition imperatives. The presence of coalition partners in the NDA tempered the extent to which the BJP could rely on an aggressive majoritarian ideology. The BJP also typically exhibited a more moderate face when in power compared with its approach when it was out of power (Aiyar and Tillin 2020). Interestingly, the agenda of both UPA and NDA

<sup>9</sup> The Mandal Commission Report recommended that 27 percent of jobs in central government services and public undertakings be reserved for Other Backward Classes. This was in addition to the reservations (affirmative action provisions) included for Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis) in the Indian constitution. For details of how the implementation of the Mandal Commission report led to change in the nature of lower caste representation, see Jaffrelot 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Kohli 2012; Panagariya 2008; Subramanian 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ahluwalia 2000; Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Frankel 2005; Kohli 2012; Subramanian 2008.

coalitions demonstrated remarkable continuity in sustaining economic liberalization (Kohli 2012).

In sum, the practice of federalism between 1989 and 2014 was far more decentralized than formal provisions would lead us to expect, or when compared with earlier periods.

### Federalism in the Modi Era

When Modi assumed power in 2014, his rhetoric emphasized cooperative federalism (Aiyar and Tillin 2020; Sengupta 2015). Despite the rhetoric, policy changes have resulted in increased centralization. This centralization has been enhanced by the consolidation of electoral power by the BJP, its ideology, and the nature of Narendra Modi's leadership. As such, the direction of federalism is consistent with overall democratic erosion in India.

Politically, several key policies and aspects have had significant implications for center-state relations. After winning its second term in 2019, the BJP implemented one of its long-standing objectives of abolishing Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. This constitutional provision was a notable example of India's model of asymmetric federalism that gave special privileges and a degree of autonomy to the state. The move was also accompanied by a decision to divide Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories, giving the center direct control of these areas. Importantly, these critical decisions were carried out with complete disregard for democratic and federal norms or procedures; representatives of Jammu and Kashmir were not consulted. Further, there was no discussion in parliament, opposition protests were ignored, major political leaders in Kashmir were arrested, and after the announcement the government effected a communications blackout and heavy security presence in the state. In December 2019, parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), catalyzing large-scale protests across India. The CAA dealt a major blow to India's secular credentials by explicitly linking religion to citizenship for the first time since 1947. A related exercise, the National Register of Citizens (NRC), was linked to the CAA and had already been implemented in Assam since 2015.

Several economic policy changes were framed as being reflective of the government's approach of cooperative federalism, but reality often proved different. In 2015, the Modi government accepted the 14th Finance Commission's recommendations to increase the share of state governments in the divisible pool of taxes, resulting in a degree of fiscal decentralization. In

contrast, in the same year, the government dismantled the 64-year-old Planning Commission and replaced it with the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog. This shift entrenched centralization in several ways (Aiyar and Tillin 2020; Sengupta 2015).

In 2017, a new Goods and Services Tax (GST) was implemented to rationalize India's indirect tax regime. The design locked the center and states into a model of collaboration, but the former has veto powers (Aiyar and Tillin 2020). Flawed implementation of the GST, as well as an economic slowdown, resulted in significant financial pressure on state governments. The Modi government took a centralizing approach to its financial relations with the states and showed little interest in easing their revenue pressures (Mukherji 2020).

Another key example of marked centralization in federalism was parliament's passage of three new agricultural acts in 2020 that reflected a fundamental reorientation of agricultural marketing (Narayanan 2020). The passage of the farm bills in parliament elicited major farmers' protests. Protests aside, two aspects of the agricultural laws are particularly critical. First, similar to other pieces of legislation enacted since 2014, these acts were ordinances brought to Parliament as bills and were subsequently passed by Parliament with little discussion or debate. Second, these acts reflected the critical incursion of the federal government into agriculture, i.e., a state subject in the Indian constitution (Aiyar and Krishnamurthy 2020).

The contextual factors of interest—electoral competition, party ideology, and the nature of leadership—enhance centralization in federalism. First, there has been a major consolidation of electoral power. The BJP won back-to-back parliamentary majorities in 2014 and 2019. Though there is still opposition to the BJP at the state level, there has been greater congruence between governments elected at the state and federal levels since 2014. Bargaining power of regional parties vis-à-vis the center has declined due to the BJP's electoral performance, Narendra Modi's electoral popularity, and the active separation of national and regional politics (Aiyar and Sircar 2020).

The BJP's ideology is fundamentally centralizing. In general, a Hindu nationalist ideology is more compatible with a unitary state than a federal one. The Modi government's reliance on an aggressive Hindu nationalist agenda only enhances this affinity. Beyond this, the current regime has fused a development rhetoric based on national unity with Hindu nationalism. For Aiyar and Tillin (2020), the BJP's "One Nation" ideological project combines

Hindu nationalism with a policy agenda that aims to strengthen national coordination, even in realms where state governments had previously taken the lead. The project also threatened ethnic accommodation, since the BJP is antagonistic to asymmetrical arrangements of federalism (Adeney and Bhattacharya 2018; Sharma and Swenden 2017).

Modi's leadership and style of governance, which combines populism, authoritarianism, majoritarianism, and a notable personalization of power, reinforce current electoral and ideological trends. The current regime has exhibited a complete disregard for democratic norms. This has been evident in the weakening and takeover of institutions, the use of state machinery to target opponents, unprecedented intolerance in public discourse, and the refusal to allow debate in legislative avenues. The Indian state has moved clearly in a majoritarian direction. Further, the central government has actively interfered with state-level politics by engineering defections from opposition parties and using the governor's office as an instrument to impose central objectives at the state level (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020). Another key aspect is administrative centralization. Modi has aggregated power within the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) by creating direct communication channels between the PMO and state bureaucrats while excluding state chief ministers.

Finally, personalization of power is central to the current regime. Modi himself is the foremost piece of the BJP's electoral strategy. Further, the BJP has created direct links between the voter and Modi through welfare provisions by affixing the label of "PM" to flagship schemes that provide private goods such as toilets, housing, and gas cylinders (Aiyar and Sircar 2020). These direct links have paid significant electoral dividends so far and bypass the states in the domains of social and human development, where they used to be critical.

In sum, BJP's electoral dominance, its majoritarian ideology, and Modi's style and norms of leadership have greatly enhanced the tilt to the center in federal-state relations.

## Conclusion

The current erosion of democracy in India is unprecedented, both in degree and kind. The practice of federalism under Modi has been broadly consistent with overall democratic backsliding. What are the prospects for federalism to act as a check on India's slide to competitive authoritarianism? Formal institutional

mechanisms are inherently biased in favor of the center and, therefore, cannot act as a check; center-state relations in the current regime and Indira Gandhi's era make that clear. Electoral competition, ideology, and leadership norms all matter to the actual trajectory of federalism on the ground. In the case of the BJP under Modi, there seems to be no evidence to suggest that either ideology or the subversion of norms will change. Given that this vision has reaped significant electoral rewards, the BJP lacks incentives to modify its ideology or pay attention to norms of accommodation.

As in the case of Indira Gandhi, the most likely vehicle for stemming the current authoritarian tide is electoral politics. As both Ziegfeld (2020) and Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) suggest, there are currently limits to the BJP's electoral dominance. These limits are most evident at the regional level, where opposition parties continue to offer significant resistance to the BJP. As such, electoral success of regional parties is one potential source of change, both as a constraint on democratic erosion and in achieving a more decentralized version of federalism.

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## The State of the Two Major Parties: BJP and Congress

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This essay paints a portrait, as of mid-2023, of the state of the two major Indian political parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (henceforth "Congress"). I cover the BJP's rise and Congress' decline since 1989 in terms of votes and seats nationally, their horizontal spread or decline across India's states, their alliances with other parties, and their overall competitive position in the party system. I also cover the evolution or shrinkage of their social bases by caste, class, religion, and region; their ideological and policy positioning; and their leadership and organizational capacity, campaigning, and messaging. Finally, I draw out the possible implications of the state of the two major parties for the future of India's democracy.

### The BJP's Electoral Rise and Congress' Decline, 1989-2014 and After

The quarter-century from 1989 to 2014 (encompassing eight national elections) saw the rise of the BJP vote share (with some setbacks) from 11% to 31%, and its mirror image, the decline of Congress from a nearly 40% vote share to 19%, with partial recoveries. However, during this period—which featured mainly minority parliamentary coalitions dependent on external support—other parties garnered 44–54% of the vote. Many (though not most) of these parties were allied at various times with the BJP or Congress by being part of either the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) since 1998 or the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) since 2004, with some parties changing sides or reverting to the third-party space. In 2014 and again in 2019, the BJP (as part of the NDA alliance) won majorities on its own while Congress crashed to its lowest-ever vote shares and seat totals. Driving the rise of the BJP and decline of Congress nationally have been the horizontal spread of the former from its earlier stronghold states and regions to new ones and the atrophy of the latter (Sridharan 2005).

How electorally competitive are the BJP and Congress now and in the near future? A party can be considered competitive if it is either the first or second party in a state by vote share. As of 2023, the BJP is one of the two leading parties in as many as 21 out of 28 states (for national elections) and is in power in 10 states with its own Chief Minister, as well as a coalition partner in five



more. The picture for Congress is quite the opposite of what it was in 1989. It is one of the two leading parties in 17 states, is in power in only four states on its own, and is the junior partner in a coalition in two states. In 14 states, non-BJP, non-Congress parties are in power on their own or leading a coalition. However, in five of these, in 2023, the ruling parties are allied to the BJP (though without the latter necessarily participating in government). Clearly, state-level developments since 2014 have tilted the balance of power at the state level in BJP's favor.

### The Changing Social Base of the Two Parties

Historically, the BJP had a narrow social base, being a primarily upper-caste and middle-class party in urban areas and largely limited to the northern and central Hindi-speaking states. Over the past thirty years, it has expanded its social base “downward” and outward to encompass the lower castes and classes, rural areas, and to western, eastern, northeastern, and parts of southern India; this expansion has accelerated since assuming power in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Congress—historically an all-India, umbrella party—has seen its social base shrink since 1989. In 2014, half of Congress' 19% vote share came from the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and religious minorities.<sup>2</sup> It has largely lost the upper castes to the BJP, which in 2019 received more votes than Congress among these latter two segments of the electorate as well as among the poor, despite Congress' positioning itself to the left of center. The BJP has, like Congress, become an umbrella party (minus Muslims) but is regionally skewed, with its main strongholds still in northern, central, and western India though less skewed in 2019 than in 2014.

### Ideological and Policy Positioning

The BJP positions itself as a nationalist party. However, this is a particular type of nationalism that is distinct from the Indian nationalism represented by Congress and the independence movement, implicit in the Constitution. The latter nationalism was inclusive in that it conceptualized India as a country of all born there (citizenship based on birth not descent), with equal rights as well as certain minority protections. The BJP's nationalism, explicitly or implicitly, is Hindu majoritarian. It and its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have always

closely followed the original formulation of Hindu Mahasabha leader V. D. Savarkar, who coined the term *Hindutva* in 1923, a concept that excludes Muslims and Christians from being a true part of the nation by defining nationality on the basis of being Hindu. Its vision of the nation encompasses only those for whom India is both the fatherland and the original home of their religion. Unlike conservative parties in the Western world, the BJP does not primarily position itself as a free-market-oriented party; it has been in favor of domestic deregulation but not clearly of trade liberalization and globalization. However, the BJP has carried out domestic deregulatory reforms, including easing the exit of loss-making companies through the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code instead of bailouts through the largely state-owned banking system and liberalization of labor laws. It has also made some attempts to privatize state-owned companies through divestment. And it has liberalized inward foreign investment, as well as private sector entry into hitherto state-dominated areas like defense manufacturing and insurance.

How well does the BJP fit the model of right-wing populism? Mudde (2007) has argued that right-wing populism is characterized by three features: first, an anti-elitism that is in particular opposed to established elites associated with the liberal position; second, a tendency towards authoritarianism; and third, a majoritarian hostility towards minorities and immigrants. The BJP appears to fit all three. It is openly hostile to the “old” Congress elite associated with Nehruvian secularism and liberalism and portrays its position as pandering to minorities. It has used government agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation, the National Investigation Agency, and the Enforcement Directorate, as well as the Income Tax Department, to hound opposition politicians and dissenters in general. It has tried to dilute the 2005 Right to Information Act by reducing the autonomy of the Central Information Commission that administers the law. It has amended the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act to pressure foreign-funded NGOs, particularly those that are critical of the government. And it is hostile to Muslims, with a history of on-the-record, anti-Muslim statements, too numerous to list, by its leaders. However, unlike the right-wing populism around the world of the past decade, the BJP's ideological positioning is not a fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent anti-globalization. Rather, it dates back to the 1920s, well before India's independence and the Partition into two states of India and Pakistan.

<sup>1</sup> For data on the BJP's support base, see Sridharan 2014 and Sridharan 2020.

<sup>2</sup> For data on Congress' support base in 2014, see Farooqui and Sridharan 2016; and for 2019, see Sridharan 2020.

Congress remains a secular and inclusive party in its basic ideological positioning, despite some instances of rank political pandering to religious sentiments of both Hindus and Muslims that have tarnished its secular credentials. These include banning cow slaughter in many states, revising the law to evade the *Shah Bano* judgement (1985) that gave divorced Muslim women alimony (hence trying to please the Muslim clergy), opening the locks of the Babri Mosque (1986) which was claimed by a section of Hindus mobilized by the BJP to be the exact birthspot of the Hindu god Rama, and the banning of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 in response to Muslim fundamentalist demands. However, since the UPA period (2004–2014), it has leaned to the left of center in its economic and social policies. During the first UPA term (2004–09), it could not take any market-oriented liberalizing initiatives due to its coalition's dependence on the left's support in parliament, but it steered the same course in its second term (2009–14). Congress rule in this period also saw a number of corruption scandals, in which politically connected businessmen received regulatory favors in areas like telecom, coal, and construction. During the Modi years since 2014, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has positioned himself as pro-poor and anti-corporate, a position that risks losing the growing aspirational middle class.

### Leadership, Organizational Capacity, Party Finance, Messaging, and Campaigning

Leadership has been a key factor in the BJP's victories in 2014 and 2019. Opinion polls have consistently given top ranking to Narendra Modi as the preferred prime minister, leaving Congress leaders far behind. The Modi mystique—an incorruptible, tough, decisive, and nationalist leader who delivers—has been the trump card in many state election campaigns too, overshadowing the party's local leaders. Organizational capacity has also been a key factor in the BJP's electoral victories, as well as in the general spread of its influence in society. Membership is a key indicator of spread and organizational capacity. The BJP has recently claimed a membership figure of 180 million (in a country with an estimated population of 1.4 billion), making it the largest party in the world, i.e., larger than the Chinese Communist Party. Despite doubts about the figure, there is little doubt that the BJP has more active members than Congress or that their numbers have been growing faster in recent years.

Both parties' constitutions spell out elaborate structures and hierarchies of party organization and modes of selection of office bearers at the national and state levels. The key questions really are whether these

constitutions are followed in their letter and spirit, and whether intra-party democracy has substance or whether it is purely form. Both parties seem to manifest top-down control or stage-managed internal elections; neither has held an openly contested election for the party presidency between two or more candidates (Singh 2014). This does not necessarily mean that there is no deliberation, but that it is instead behind the scenes. Both parties' presidents have officially been elected by consensus, but in practice have been selected by a few key power brokers. In both parties, the president then nominates key office bearers. Nominations for elections are done by State Election Committees in both parties, but the final call is by the National Election Committee, in a largely top-down process (Farooqui and Sridharan 2014).

How federal are the parties in their internal functioning and how much leeway do they give to state-level leaders? While in both parties final control over state-level party affairs is in the hands of their central (national) leadership, the general impression since 2003 is that the BJP has allowed state-level leaders to complete multiple terms in their stronghold states and build their own, as well as the party's, bases.

As regards to party finance, the BJP has developed an overwhelming advantage since 2014, and particularly since the introduction in 2018 of the opaque, electoral bonds system for donations to parties. Electoral bonds are time-limited bearer bonds that donors can purchase from the State Bank of India and subsequently transfer to a political party's registered bank account. The purchaser's identity would not be revealed publicly to protect donor anonymity, but the party receiving the funds would know who the donor is. Neither the party nor the donor is required to reveal any information. Since the system is operated by the government-owned State Bank of India, information on donors and amounts can surely be accessed by the ruling party—knowing this, donors could be deterred from donating to the opposition. Until now, over 90% of the money collected from electoral bonds has gone to the BJP.<sup>3</sup>

How effective and innovative have the two parties been in their messaging and campaigning, including the use of new media as well as traditional door-to-door methods? As Jha (2019) and Verma (2024, forthcoming) have shown, the BJP has developed a robust social media infrastructure since 2014 that has left Congress far behind. Additionally, the BJP enjoys the support of a much larger swathe of the television and print media (Verma 2024).

<sup>3</sup> On political finance in general and on the electoral bonds scheme, see Sridharan and Vaishnav 2018.

## Possible Implications for the Quality of Democracy in the Near Future

What does the current competitive strength of the BJP imply for the strength and quality of India's democracy?<sup>4</sup> To discuss this, we need to understand where the BJP intends to take India and what that implies in terms of possible constitutional amendments and policy shifts. The BJP's parent organization, the RSS, has always spoken of India as a Hindu Rashtra, a Hindu nation or nation-state, or suggesting that that is the objective. In addition, the BJP itself has always derided the actual practice of secularism in India as the "appeasement" of, or pandering to, minorities. However, the party has never clearly defined what a Hindu Rashtra is or should be, what the constitutional dispensation would be like, what the laws on citizenship and rights would be, what rights minorities would have, or whether the political order would be federal.

According to Aakar Patel, former India head of Amnesty International, Hindu Rashtra is an order that would not require constitutional and legal changes (2020). He argues that Hindu Rashtra is already here because it simply means Hindu political hegemony. In other words, Muslims would be excluded from or marginalized in the political power structure. They would also face continual harassment, intimidation, and occasional violence by organizations allied to the ruling party, combined with misuse of the police to give them *de facto* impunity. Patel further argues that this has already happened. As a consequence (as well as by deliberate design), Muslims are excluded in the political executive (the council of ministers), save for perhaps a token presence. Hindu political monopoly can happen within the constitution since voting patterns and electoral results allow it; in all but a handful (15) of Lok Sabha constituencies, Muslims are not a local majority. The prerequisite for this monopoly is to generate among the Hindu majority an aversion to voting for Muslim candidates, and that is being done through the gradual spread of prejudice by the BJP and its allied organizations. After all, in contrast to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, religious minorities do not have reserved seats in parliament or the state legislatures and, hence, lack any guarantee of legislative representation or of inclusion at the executive (ministerial) level. Moreover, the general spread of anti-

<sup>4</sup> As for the longer-term future beyond 2024, it is likely that the allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha to states, now frozen until 2026, will occur on the basis of the next census whenever it is held (the 2021 census was postponed due to the pandemic), implying a greater allocation to northern states (BJP's stronghold) instead of to southern ones.

Muslim prejudice makes opposition parties wary of nominating Muslim candidates, thus further reducing Muslim legislative representation.

However, if Hindu Rashtra is defined in more extreme ways, requiring formal inequality of rights or something equivalent, then the BJP's ideology will directly clash not only with the Constitution, which the party has formally committed to respecting, but also with the basic principles of liberal democracy. Even the first scenario will render India an illiberal democracy. Here, organizations allied to the ruling party and with *de facto* political protection, if combined with a passive judiciary, could make some citizens in effect less than equal, and in which rights, particularly of dissenters and even of the opposition, could become fragile. However, it would not yet approximate competitive authoritarianism or electoral autocracy due to the fact opposition parties rule a dozen states, unless there is serious curtailment of the normal political freedoms necessary for an opposition to function.

To return to the larger issue of liberal democracy's fate in India, the question that arises is how dominant is the BJP, both ideologically and electorally? Electoral dominance can be obtained in a first-past-the-post electoral system by winning a plurality of votes against a divided opposition. This has been the pattern of the BJP's majorities in 2014 and 2019, as with Congress majorities from 1952 to 1984. To gauge how ideologically dominant the BJP has become, one can look at the electorate's attitudes towards minorities, particularly Muslims, in 2014 and 2019 as a rough proxy for the acceptance of BJP ideology.

We see from the 2019 post-electoral Centre for the Study of Democratic Societies/Lokniti Survey, despite responses to some questions indicating a further spread of Hindu-majoritarian attitudes compared to 2014, that a large majority still had what can be described as egalitarian or accommodating attitudes to minorities.<sup>5</sup>

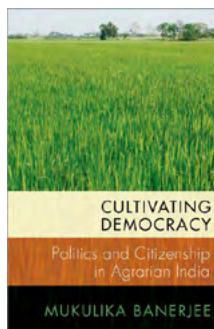
What emerges is that while the *Hindutva* ideology and attitudes have spread, the majority is still liberal in its attitude toward minorities. In other words, as of now, the BJP has achieved electoral but not yet ideological dominance. Also, the Constitution has so far withstood contentious proposed amendments that threaten fundamental rights, secularism, federalism, and judicial independence protected by judicial doctrine since 1973. These conditions together safeguard liberal democracy in India from more extreme types of erosion and improve its chances of survival.

<sup>5</sup> For details of the responses to questions on minorities in the Lokniti/CSDS 2019 post-electoral survey, see Sridharan 2020.

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## Author Exchange



***Cultivating Democracy: Politics and Citizenship in Agrarian India***. By Mukulika Banerjee. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 254p. Hardcover, paper, and Ebook.

Review by Sushmita Pati, Assistant Professor, National Law School of India University, Bangalore

*Cultivating Democracy* is a worm's eye view of Indian elections. A close study of two villages in West Bengal, it takes us through everyday conflicts generated by pride, competitiveness, and shifting alliances, and shows how the election is not foreign to them. The election may stand out as an extraordinary event that takes place every four years, but its fate is decided by perceptions and notions built through daily affairs within the village. Cultivation, therefore, is at once a metaphor for the slow, patient, and sometimes even unpredictable process that needs care, but in the context of an actual agrarian society, "cultivation" also refers to land and agrarian relations that shape the nature of electoral politics. Reminiscent of Veena Das's pathbreaking work (1995) that oscillated between specific events and the contours of Indian society, Professor Banerjee takes us back and forth between the big and small events of festivals, harvests, and even scandals to the event of elections, and how they shape each other.

As a student of political science, for me, Professor Banerjee's book provides insights on Indian politics that have eluded us. As Indian political science has mostly privileged the study of institutions, we seldom see the myriad ways in which banalities of everyday life inform the workings of Indian democracy. While institutions are made by rules, laws, constitutions, and their amendments, they are also largely shaped by public culture. This broader omission of public culture from the study of institutions has cost us quite a bit. Maybe with the exception of a few political scientists, we do not have much to say when we are faced with the erosion of our institutions and the supposed decline of this assumed democratic culture. Banerjee's emphasis on the term "social imaginaries"<sup>1</sup> allows for a shared understanding of a socio-political life to emerge that remains outside both the precincts of elite cultures and the logic of articulation.

<sup>1</sup> She borrows the term from Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor.

This book comes to us at an important juncture, when some of these questions have begun to take shape. What has populism been like in India and what has its relationship been with democracy? In times when we seem to be going back from a multiparty democratic system to one dominated by a single party, how do we make sense of whether democracy was at all cultivated in our country? Banerjee's account does not take these questions head on, possibly, because she looks at the transition from another kind of party hegemony of a democratically elected communist regime for over thirty years in the context of Bengal. But if one reads this question into her work, Banerjee's thesis does not buy into welfarist explanations of populism. In Banerjee's work, an ordinary voter is not just someone bartering welfare for votes, but rather an individual deeply seeking some sense of equality. Partha Chatterjee's much celebrated argument (2019) that links governmentalisation of the Indian poor with the rise of populism seems to not hold true in Madanpur and Chishti, the two villages that Banerjee studies. The counter-argument that Banerjee's book seems to hold is that the residents of Madanpur and Chishti claim a sense of dignity and equality through the act of voting. This account asks us to reconsider whether welfare indeed is at the heart of whatever this new form of populism in India is. How would Banerjee then view this downslide in democratic institutions if it is not one also accompanied by a downslide in democratic culture? Without reducing Banerjee's work to an exceptional story in West Bengal but actually analyzing it as a real possible explanation of social imaginaries across India, what could be the form of these social imaginaries that could lead to humiliating defeat of regimes but also actively contribute to the rise of other personality cults?

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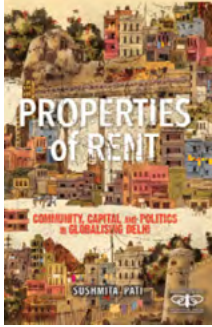
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## Response from Mukulika Banerjee

Thank you to Professor Sushmita Pati for her considered review of my book. As a political anthropologist who has been read and engaged with political scientists and political theorists for over twenty-five years, I especially appreciate her recognition of what an anthropological scholarship on democracy and politics can bring. The ethnographic method that is at the heart of anthropology is more than merely the use of "qualitative methods;" it privileges listening to, watching, and being part of the world we wish to understand, which is a more intersubjective experience than merely asking people questions. Further, it explains politics not just through political institutions, but also through culture. It does this by exploring how non-political aspects of society shape and are shaped by political imagination.

The example of West Bengal between 1998–2013 presented in my book has valuable lessons in understanding how, despite the hegemonic hold of a ruling party, ordinary citizens are able to create opposition to it. These initiatives, as I show, start at the individual and local levels and require people to have the courage to ask questions of their representatives, work with others, create solidarity, and remain committed to the goal of electoral change. The use of "non-political" spaces and institutions is critical to this process and requires hard work, patience, vigilance, and hope—the values that the process of cultivation of crops and the cultivation of democracy share. Agricultural workers and farmers have something quite profound to teach us about how to cultivate democracy.

India is dominated by a single party in the national parliament at the moment but has a vibrant multi-party system in place with a number of regional and national parties in charge of state governments. The hegemonic hold of a single party in New Delhi is not just electoral, but a cultural and ideological one through *Hindutva* or Hindu majoritarianism that goes against the very constitutional imagination of a diverse and plural India. The hold of this ideology is deep in some parts of the country and has been achieved through the work of cadres who have often worked outside the realm of "formal" politics. Scholars of Indian politics must therefore understand how so-called "non-political" spaces affect political and electoral outcomes; this is where anthropology can provide insight.



***Properties of Rent: Community, Capital and Politics in Globalising Delhi.*** By Sushmita Pati. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 320p. Hardback and eBook.

Review by Mukulika Banerjee, Associate Professor of Anthropology, The London School of Economics and Political Science

This book is a successful and captivating effort at cutting through the knotty subject of urban transformation in India, with its entangled threads of property, rent, and community. The book is set in two “urban villages” in the metropolis of New Delhi and examines life in this setting through a fine-grained analysis of multiple political events that took place during the author’s fieldwork in this setting. These include an eviction, two elections, the creation of solidarity when homes are threatened by “demolition drives” by local authorities, a local MLA’s misplaced vigilantism, and much more.

The book is a response to the anthropologist Anna Tsing’s call for capitalism to be studied locally and intersectionally in order to examine how concepts such as value, profit, and ownership take particular enmeshed forms in each instance of their presence. Tsing argues that studying capitalism merely through (masculinised) discussions of financialised global flows of capital misses how it works on the ground. Pati’s resulting effort is an admirable one.

The key contribution the book seeks to make is to mark a sharp distinction between “rent” and “capital.” While capital by its very nature is restless and productive only when it grows, rent is by definition linked to static resources such as land that need to be held close and monopolized in order to generate value through its controlled use. Thus, “rent shapes the physical space of these villages and appears to be the only common ‘asset’ which unites them socially and economically” (138).

The setting of that most peculiar form of habitation—that of an urban village—is generative of a whole set of new questions that the author successfully persuades us to think about. I outline three of them here. First is one of nomenclature. Given the differences, we need to adopt the terminology “rural” and “urban” villages to further distinguish that urban villages are precisely the result of the *lad dora* (red line) that separated productive agricultural land from land on which dwellings stood. The former was sold for profit, and the whole rentier

economy of urban villages rests on this distinction. Second, a critical distinction between them is, of course, land use—rural villages (which continue to be composed of agricultural land and dwellings) are becoming more economically diverse, with a move away from agriculture due to its lack of profitability. In urban villages, the “red line” land forced this demarcation by the takeover of agricultural land for building “development,” leaving inhabited land for villagers to construct rent-generating buildings. Third, through the detailed discussion of social institutions such as *bhaichara*, *chak*, and *kunbas*, Pati draws attention to alternative models of ownership that complicate the workings of capitalism. This is a classic example of why capitalism needs to be studied in specific local contexts.

As a social anthropologist with an interest in understanding the nature of rurality, I would like to ask Professor Pati whether we can think further about what kind of “community” an urban village creates. Anthropological and sociological literature has presented rural village life and its community through both political and non-political lenses. The very important distinction that emerges from Professor Pati’s work is that urban villages, unlike urban neighborhoods and rural villages, are not segregated by caste and religion. What then are the social technologies, especially in the lives of women, kinship and marriage practices, and in religious life, that create solidarity and community?

### ***Response from Sushmita Pati***

As a scholar whose work also draws on studying two villages closely, albeit of a very different order, Professor Banerjee’s careful reading of my work raises some really valuable insights. The questions we ask and the phenomena we study may be different, but somewhere we converge on our concerns for political subjectivities informed by land, property, kinship, and politics. If Professor Banerjee looks at political behavior through an embodied, lived lens, I explore political economy and its workings.

The difference that I draw between rent and capital may appear sharp at times, but to me, this distinction is somewhat also a heuristic. Rent and capital are different but not separable. If anything, the meteoric growth of suburban parts of a city like Delhi only shows that their interests are not necessarily divergent. In *Properties of Rent*, I draw them out of each other heuristically to show the complex ways in which capitalism in the Global South is constituted. The restlessness of capital is in so many ways abetted by the inertia of rent, which is why everything looks like capital. But when we do

disentangle the two, we see much more at work. We see a relationship that has its own frictions, which also produces complex subjectivities and violence.

But unlike Banerjee's political community, the story of community in the urban villages is not particularly flattering. These political solidarities come with vicious forms of exclusion and hierarchy. If Banerjee's account is one of "cultivating democracy," my account asks how these hierarchies solidified by communal monopolies of families and caste groups feed into electoral politics. Banerjee asks a particularly sharp question: which social technologies of kinship and marriage (which are considered non-political) inform the space of collective life? I find it a particularly difficult question to answer. Having had mostly access to masculine spaces, there is nothing really like a "non-political" sphere as it emerges in Banerjee's work. This is not to say that it doesn't exist, but my guess would be that it can only be accessed through the familial space, one that was not quite available to me during fieldwork.

### Joint Commentary from Banerjee and Pati

Our books refocus attention on the study of Indian villages, a field that has suffered academic neglect in recent years. We each present two villages—Pati's are located in a metropolis, Banerjee's in rural India. While the two contexts are significantly different, together our work draws attention to new ways of comprehending the village. First, we demonstrate that urban and rural villages are distinct. Second, contrary to widely-held accounts, we show that the village is a productive site to understand democracy, politics, and political economy, not merely a recipient for ideas and ideology. If Banerjee's work draws attention to a deeply agrarian society that is governed by cultivation and other economic activities, Pati's work shows villages that exist within the frames of the city and yet are informed by rural cultural and social codes. For both, the social imaginaries of community, religion, and kinship inform their political subjectivities and economic life.

Furthermore, when read together, our books provide insight into the rural subjectivities that exist in urban spaces—in the figure of the migrant worker and inhabitants of villages encapsulated by urban expansion. This compels us to consider the ways in which a more active citizenship from inhabitants of rural India affects urban India and how the dynamics of land and rent determine politics and citizenship in the city. They indicate that these sensibilities are not merely spatially "rural" or "urban" but travel along with the people and continue to form new constellations

of being in different places. Adam Auerbach and Tariq Thachil's exciting new work, *Migrants and Machine Politics*, confirms Banerjee's argument that even the poorest in the country, those who live in slums, value the vote, and above all, a life of dignity. We hope that new research in the fields of both democracy and migration will continue to explore how sensibilities are shaped and change across space and time. That is, how do political and economic sensibilities of citizens change and adapt as they move across villages and cities?

## Meet the Authors



**Mukulika Banerjee** is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and was inaugural Director of the LSE South Asia Centre from 2015–2020. Interweaving the political into social anthropology to understand human behavior has been a core component of Mukulika's long-standing academic engagement with South Asia. She studied in Delhi and Oxford universities and taught at Oxford and UCL before joining LSE. Her books include *Why India Votes?* (2014), *The Pathan Unarmed* (2001), and *The Sari* (2003, with Daniel Miller), and she was the editor of *Muslim Portraits* (2007). Her latest monograph is *Cultivating Democracy: Politics and Citizenship in Agrarian India* (2021) published by OUP, New York.



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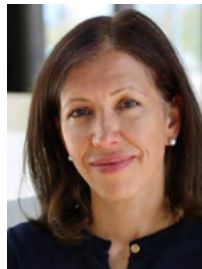
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**Eswaran Sridharan** is the Academic Director and Chief Executive of the University of Pennsylvania Institute for the Advanced Study of India (UPIASI) in Delhi. He is a political scientist who has published on Indian and comparative politics and international relations. He has held

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and the place of racial conflict in each. He is now at work with David Waldner on a book-length study of America's Reconstruction in comparative perspective with other postwar efforts to construct democratic polities and diverse economies in societies dominated by labor-repressive agriculture. He is also exploring the historical legacies of mid-20th century urban racial conflict for America's contemporary policing with Jake Grumbach and Daniel Ziblatt.

### Managing Editor



**Derek Groom** is an Academic Program Specialist with the Center for Emerging Democracies. In this role, he manages the center's programming, administration, and research/outreach activities. Before coming to U-M, Derek worked in Washington, DC at American Councils for International Education,

administering the Overseas Flagship Programs and Flagship Language Initiatives in Eurasia and Africa. In 2013, Derek completed the Russian Overseas Flagship Program in St. Petersburg, Russia as a Boren Scholar.

### Volume Editors



**Larry Diamond** is the William L. Clayton Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, the Mosbacher Senior Fellow in Global Democracy at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI), and a Bass University Fellow in Undergraduate Education at Stanford University. He is also professor by

courtesy of Political Science and Sociology at Stanford. He leads the Hoover Institution's programs on China's Global Sharp Power and on Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific Region. He is the founding coeditor of the *Journal of Democracy* and also serves as senior consultant at the International Forum for Democratic Studies of the National Endowment for Democracy. His research focuses on democratic trends and conditions around the world and on policies and reforms to defend and advance democracy.



**Sumit Ganguly** is a Distinguished Professor of Political Science and holds the Tagore Chair in Indian Cultures and Civilizations at Indiana University, Bloomington. A specialist on the international and comparative politics of South Asia, he is the author, co-author, editor, or co-editor of over twenty books

on the region. He is currently the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Studies Review*, and he serves on the editorial boards of *Asian Security*, *Asian Survey*, *Current History*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *The India Review*, *International Security*, and the *Journal of Democracy*. His most recent book (with William R. Thompson and Manjeet Pardesi) is *The Sino-Indian Rivalry: Implications for Global Order*. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.



**Dinsha Mistree** is a Research Fellow in the Program on Strengthening US–India Relations at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and an affiliated scholar at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford. He studies the relationship between governance and economic growth

in developing countries. His scholarship concentrates on the political economy of legal systems, public administration, and education policy, with a regional focus on India. He holds a Ph.D. and an M.A. in Politics from Princeton University, with an S.M. and an S.B. from MIT. His published work appears in a wide range of outlets including *Stanford Law Review*, *Social Science and Medicine*, and *Public Administration Review*.

### Guest Editors



**Anindita Adhikari** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Michigan’s Center for Emerging Democracies for 2023–2025. She received her Ph.D. in Sociology from Brown University in 2023. Her research looks at the institutionalization of new modes of local governance for public

participation, claim-making, and oversight that are embedded in India’s welfare rights architecture. Her dissertation traces how these forums for participation and accountability are built and sustained over time in fragmented contexts and offer the possibilities for assertion of democratic rights by historically marginalized groups.



**Nandini Dey** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Michigan’s Center for Emerging Democracies for 2023–2025. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from Johns Hopkins University in 2023. Her dissertation investigates the links between colonial-era institutions and postcolonial citizenship

regimes, aiming to illustrate the foundational ways imperial legacies constitute citizenship regimes after independence. Her research has been funded by the APSA–NSF Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant and the Nicole Suveges Fieldwork Fellowship.

### About *Democracy and Autocracy*

*Democracy and Autocracy* is the official newsletter of the American Political Science Association’s Democracy and Autocracy section (formerly known as the Comparative Democratization section). First known as *CompDem*, it has been published three times a year since 2003. In October 2010, the newsletter was renamed *APSA-CD* and expanded to include substantive articles on democracy, as well as news and notes on the latest developments in the field. In September 2018, it was renamed the *Annals of Comparative Democratization* to reflect the increasingly high academic content and recognition of the symposia.

## Section News

The following annual Section awards were announced this summer. You can find complete details on the [section website](#):

**Juan Linz Prize for Best Dissertation**

Winner: **Tanushree Goyal** (Princeton University), *Representation from Below: How Women Mobilize Inside Parties* (Ph.D. in Political Science, University of Oxford, 2021).

Honorable Mention: **Jessie W. Trudeau** (Syracuse University), *Machine Gun Politics: Why Politicians Cooperate with Criminal Groups* (Ph.D. in Government, Harvard University, 2022).

**Best Article Award**

Winner: **Ji Yeon Hong** (University of Michigan), **Sunkyoung Park** (Incheon National University), and **Hyunjoo Yang** (Sogang University), "[In Strongman We Trust: The Political Legacy of the New Village Movement in South Korea](#)," *American Journal of Political Science*, 2022.

Honorable Mention: **Laia Balcells** (Georgetown University), **Valeria Palanza** (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile), and **Elsa Voytas** (Princeton University), "[Do Transitional Justice Museums Persuade Visitors? Evidence from a Field Experiment](#)," *The Journal of Politics* 84 (1): 496–510, 2022.

Honorable Mention: **Matthew D. Cebul** (U.S. Institute of Peace), and **Sharan Grewal** (College of William & Mary), "[Military Conscription and Nonviolent Resistance](#)," *Comparative Political Studies* 55 (13), 2217–2249, 2022.

**Juan J. Linz Best Book Award**

Co-Winners: **Steven Levitsky** (Harvard University) and **Lucan Way** (University of Toronto), *Revolutions and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism* (Princeton University Press).

**Fiona Feiang Shen-Bayh** (College of William & Mary), *Undue Process: Persecution and Punishment in Autocratic Courts* (Cambridge University Press).

Honorable Mention: **Michael Coppedge**, **Amanda B. Edgell**, **Carl Henrik Knutsen**, and **Staffen I. Lindberg**, eds. *Why Democracies Develop and Decline* (Cambridge University Press).

**Juan Linz Best Field Work Award**

Winner: **Emilia Simison** (Tulane University), for fieldwork in her dissertation submitted to MIT, "Resetting Public Policy? Democracies, Dictatorships, and Policy Change."

Honorable Mention: **Will Freeman** (Council on Foreign Relations) for fieldwork in his dissertation submitted to Princeton University, "Ending Impunity: The Prosecution of Grand Corruption in Latin America."

**Best Paper Award**

Winner: **Sharan Grewal** (College of William & Mary), "Military Repression and Restraint in Algeria."

Honorable Mention: **Reyaad Allie**, PhD candidate in Political Science, Stanford University

**From the National Endowment for Democracy**

Stanford Professor Larry J. Diamond will deliver the 20th Annual Lipset Lecture on Democracy in the World on Wednesday, December 6 at 5:30pm (ET). Hosted by the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies and the Embassy of Canada to the United States, the Seymour Martin Lipset Lecture is an intellectual platform for men and women who, like Lipset, have made important contributions to our thinking about key issues of democracy through their writings and other accomplishments. This year's lecture will focus on "Power, Performance, and Legitimacy: Renewing Global Democratic Momentum." Please [register](#) to watch the lecture virtually.

A new book from the *Journal of Democracy* examines autocrats' use of "sharp power," one of the gravest threats to liberal, representative government today. In *Defending Democracy in an Age of Sharp Power*, editors William J. Dobson, Tarek Masoud, and Christopher Walker bring together leading analysts to explain how the world's authoritarians are attempting to erode the pillars of democratic societies—and what we can do about it. The international contributors in this collection identify the considerable resources that democracy provides for blunting sharp power's

edge. With case studies of successful resistance efforts in such countries as Australia, the Czech Republic, and Taiwan, this book offers an urgent message for anyone concerned with the defense of democracy in the twenty-first century. Learn more, including how to purchase a copy, at [journalofdemocracy.org/books/defending-democracy-in-an-age-of-sharp-power/](http://journalofdemocracy.org/books/defending-democracy-in-an-age-of-sharp-power/)

### From the *Journal of Democracy*

The *Journal of Democracy* has been a leading forum for expert discussion of the biggest questions in democracy—all in a clear, accessible prose that makes our essays favorites for university settings. As you refresh your syllabi, consider this collection of recent *Journal* essays on the ever-important fate of global freedom, from Putin’s Russia to what makes democracy resilient:

#### [“The Origins of Military Supremacy in Dictatorships”](#) (July 2023)

Dan Slater, Lucan A. Way, Jean Lachapelle, Adam E. Casey.

Some autocracies are dominated by their militaries, while others hold the generals in check. The key is this: If an autocratic regime did not create its military, it will struggle to control it.

#### [“Why Russia’s Democracy Never Began”](#) (July 2023)

Maria Snegovaya

People obsess over where Russia’s democracy went wrong. The truth is it did not fail: Russia’s democratic transition never got off the starting blocks.

#### **“Symposium: Is India Still a Democracy?”** (July 2023)

In this symposium, the *Journal of Democracy* brings together leading scholars of India to perform a biopsy on the state of that country’s fragile democracy, and to offer us a prognosis for its future.

#### [“Why India’s Democracy Is Dying”](#)

Maya Tudor

Under Narendra Modi, India is maintaining the trappings of democracy while it increasingly harasses the opposition, attacks minorities, and stifles dissent. It can still reverse course, but the damage is mounting.

#### [“The Authoritarian Roots of India’s Democracy”](#)

Tripurdaman Singh

To say that Indian democracy is backsliding misunderstands the country’s history and the challenges it faces: A certain authoritarianism is embedded in India’s constitution and political structures.

#### [“Modi’s Undeclared Emergency”](#)

Šumit Ganguly

Since the beginning of the second Modi government, an emboldened BJP has launched a steady, comprehensive, and unprecedented attack on civil liberties, personal rights, and free speech across India.

#### [“The Exaggerated Death of Indian Democracy”](#)

Rahul Verma

It is true that politics under the BJP is a break from the past. But attempts to reduce the country’s present condition to democratic backsliding misunderstands the moment and is an injustice to India’s journey as a democracy.

#### [“Why India’s Political Elites Are to Blame”](#)

Vineeta Yadav

India has a long history of elites acting undemocratically. But the current government’s attacks on the media, arrests of opposition, and discriminatory laws are deeper and more alarming.

#### [“Why Israeli Democracy Is in Crisis”](#) (July 2023)

Noam Gidron

When Israel’s new government introduced proposals that threatened the judiciary’s independence, the country erupted in protest. These tensions will not soon end. Likud, once a center-right party, is now as populist as the European far right.

**[“The Putin Myth”](#)** (April 2023)*Kathryn Stoner*

Vladimir Putin’s reputation as a skillful leader was buoyed by years of economic good fortune. But when his regime faltered, his rule quickly descended into the fearful, repressive, and paranoid state we see today.

**[“Why Monarchies Still Reign”](#)** (April 2023)*Adria Lawrence*

Oppositions in monarchies don’t have to stage revolutions to win freedom: Monarchies are as compatible with democracy as they are with autocracy. The challenge for those who would remove a king is not to fall for the promises of reform that never come.

**[“In Europe, Democracy Erodes from the Right”](#)**  
(January 2023)*Milan W. Svolik, Johanna Lutz, Filip Milačić, Elena Avramovska*

When ordinary voters are given a choice between democracy and partisan loyalty, who will put democracy first? Frighteningly, Europe harbors a deep reservoir of authoritarian potential.

**[“What Indonesian Democracy Can Teach the World”](#)**  
(January 2023)*Dan Slater*

Indonesia is a leading example for fledgling democracies navigating tough transitions. But it is imperiled, and if it gives way, the loss for the democratic world will be enormous.

**[“Why Latin America’s Democracies Are Stuck”](#)**  
(January 2023)*Scott Mainwaring, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán*

This is the toughest time for Latin America’s democracies in decades. Democratic stagnation makes them ripe targets for illiberal populists and other would-be authoritarians who will feed the region’s worst vices.

**[“How India’s Ruling Party Erodes Democracy”](#)**  
(October 2022)*Ashutosh Varshney*

The BJP has won two successive national elections, but it refuses to respect the rights of Muslims. Is democracy on a collision course with liberalism?

**[“Why Democracy Survives: A Debate”](#)** (October 2022)**[“Why Democracies Survive”](#)***Jason Brownlee, Kenny Miao*

Democracies are under stress, but they are not about to buckle. The erosion of norms and other woes do not spell democratic collapse. With incredibly few exceptions, affluent democracies will endure, no matter the schemes of would-be autocrats.

**[“The Danger Is Real”](#)***Yascha Mounk*

Analysis that subtly defines away problems is not going to help democracies survive the threats they now face. The fear is warranted.

**[“Questioning Backsliding”](#)***Nancy Bermeo*

It is no easy feat to agree on how democratic backsliding should be measured. No surprise scholars are coming up with strikingly different results.

**[“The Value of ‘Tyrannophobia’”](#)***Tom Ginsburg*

Democratic death has been exaggerated. But fear that a democracy is going to break down may, ironically, be one of the things that protects it.

**[“Follow the Leader”](#)***Susan D. Hyde, Elizabeth N. Saunders*

Democracies are increasingly under attack by the leaders they elect. We may not know the damage until it is too late.

**"A Quiet Consensus"**

Jason Brownlee, Kenny Miao

We welcome the common ground. The challenge ahead is to protect democracies genuinely in peril, while not losing valuable time and resources chasing authoritarian ghosts.

**José Antonio Cheibub** (University of Pittsburgh) was appointed the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Department of Political Science.

**Paula Clerici** (Associate Professor of Government and Politics, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella-CONICET) recently published the following article with co-authors Adrián Albala and Alejandro Olivares:

Albala, Adrián, Paula Clerici, and Alejandro Olivares. 2023. "[Determinants of the Cabinet Size in Presidential Systems.](#)" *Governance*, Early View.

**Sebastian Dettman** (Assistant Professor of Political Science, Singapore Management University) recently published the following article on opposition behavior in an authoritarian legislature:

Dettman, Sebastian. 2023. "[The Geographic Scope of Opposition Challenges in Malaysia's Parliament.](#)" *Pacific Affairs* 96 (2): 253-279.

**Benjamin Garcia Holgado** (Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Delaware) recently published the following articles:

Garcia Holgado, Benjamin, and Scott Mainwaring. 2023. "[Why Democracy Survives Presidential Encroachments: Argentina since 1983.](#)" *Comparative Politics* 5 (4): 525-548.

Garcia Holgado, Benjamin, and Raul Sanchez-Urribarri. 2023. "[Court-Packing and Democratic Decay: a Necessary Relationship?](#)" *Global Constitutionalism* 12 (2): 350-377.

Garcia Holgado, Benjamin. 2023. "[Radicalization and the Origins of Populist Narratives about the Courts: The Argentinian Case, 2007-2015.](#)" *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 3 (2): 43-64.

**John Harbeson** (Professor of Political Science Emeritus, City College of New York) is pleased to report the publication of the 7th edition of his textbook [Africa in World Politics](#) (Routledge) on June 23.

**Debra Javeline** (Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Notre Dame) recently published the following:

Javeline, Debra. 2023. *After Violence: Russia's Beslan School Massacre and the Peace that Followed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chesler, Angela, Debra Javeline, Kimberly Peh, and Shana Scogin. 2023. "[Is Democracy the Answer to Intractable Climate Change?](#)" *Global Environmental Politics*: 1-16.

**Paul Kenny** (Professor of Political Science, Institute for Humanities & Social Sciences, Australian Catholic University) recently published the following book:

Kenny, Paul D. 2023. *Why Populism? Political Strategy from Ancient Greece to the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Staffan I. Lindberg** (Director, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg) received a medal in June from H.M. The King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden for significant contributions in the field of political science research. Earlier this spring, he was also awarded the Rettig Prize by The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, for innovative advances within democracy research.

**Shamiran Mako** (Assistant Professor of International Relations, Pardee School of Global Studies, Boston University) recently published the following article on dissident mobilization and ethnic elite bargaining in pre- and post-2003 Iraq:

Mako, Shamiran. 2023. "[Divided Opposition, Fragmented Statebuilding: Elite Bargaining in Pre- and Post-2003 Iraq.](#)" *International Peacekeeping*.

Professor Mako also edited a [special issue](#) on the 20th anniversary of the Iraq War with the *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*.

**Jennifer McCoy** was named a Regents' Professor [of Political Science] at Georgia State University, the highest rank and honor awarded by the Board of Regents of the state of Georgia.

**Ameni Mehrez** (Ph.D. student in comparative politics, Central European University, Budapest) recently published the following paper:

Mehrez, Ameni. [“When Right is Left: Values and Voting Behavior in Tunisia.”](#) *Political Behavior*.

**Monika Nalepa** (Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago) recently published the following article:

Nalepa, Monika, and Konstantin Sonin. 2023. [“How Does Kompromat Affect Politics? A Model of Transparency Regimes.”](#) *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 18 (3): 365–402.

**Cheryl O’Brien** (Associate Professor of Political Science, San Diego State University) recently published the following two articles:

O’Brien, Cheryl, and Morgan Newport. 2023. [“Prioritizing Women’s Choices, Consent, and Bodily Autonomy: From a Continuum of Violence to Women-Centric Reproductive Care.”](#) *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 333: p.116110.

Egyir, Irene S., Cheryl O’Brien, Joseph Bandanaa, and George P. Opit. 2023. [“Feeding the Future in Ghana: Gender Inequality, Poverty, and Food Insecurity.”](#) *World Medical & Health Policy*, Early View.

**Lynette Ong** (Professor of Political Science, Munk School, University of Toronto) recently won three more awards for her book *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China* (Oxford UP, 2022):

- American Sociological Association (ASA) Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship in Political Sociology, Co-Winner, 2023
- American Political Science Association (APSA) Human Rights Best Book Award 2023
- American Sociological Association (ASA) Gordon Hirabayashi Human Rights Book Award 2023

**María Isabel Puerta** (Adjunct Professor/Research Fellow, Valencia College/GAPAC) recently published the following article with co-authors Armando Chaguaceda Noguera and Johanna Cilano Peláez:

Chaguaceda, Armando, Johanna Cilano Pelaez, and Maria Isabel Puerta. 2023. [“Illiberal Narratives in Latin America: Russian and Allied Media as Vehicles of Autocratic Cooperation.”](#) *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*.

**Fiona Shen-Bayh** will have a joint appointment between the Department of Government and Politics and the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland, starting in Fall 2023. Her book, *Undue Process: Persecution and Punishment in Autocratic Courts* (2022, Cambridge University Press) also won three awards this year: the Theodore J. Lowri First Book Award, the Giovanni Sartori Book Award, and the Juan Linz Best Book Prize in the Comparative Study of Democracy & Autocracy.

**Ben Smith** (Professor of Political Science, University of Florida) has accepted appointment as Director of the Center for Global Islamic Studies.

**Güneş Murat Tezcür** became the Director of and Professor at the School of Politics and Global Studies at Arizona State University in July 2023.

**Julian Waller** (Professorial Lecturer in Political Science, George Washington University and Associate Research Analyst, Center for Naval Analyses) recently published the following articles:

Waller, Julian G. 2023. [“Distinctions with a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study.”](#) *Political Studies Review*, OnlineFirst.

Waller, Julian G. 2023. [“Mimicking the Mad Printer: Legislating Illiberalism in Post-Soviet Eurasia.”](#) *Problems of Post-Communism* 70 (3): 225–240.

Waller, Julian G. 2022. [“Disentangling Authoritarianism and Illiberalism in the Context of the Global States System.”](#) *Journal of International Affairs* 75 (1): 33–54.

Members of the **Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute** at the University of Gothenburg published the following peer-reviewed articles and policy working papers:

Maerz, Seraphine F., Amanda B. Edgell, Matthew C. Wilson, Sebastian Hellmeier, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2023. [“Episodes of Regime Transformation.”](#) *Journal of Peace Research*, Online First.

Wilson, Matthew C., Karoline Wiesner, and Samuel Bien. 2023. [“The Hidden Dimension in Democracy.”](#) V-Dem Working Paper 137.

del Río, Adrián, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Philipp M Lutscher. 2023. [“Education Policies and Systems across Modern History: A Global Dataset.”](#) V-Dem Working Paper 138.

McMann, Kelly M., and Daniel J. Tisch. 2023. [“How Lower Levels of Corruption in Democracies Prevented COVID Deaths.”](#) V-Dem Working Paper 139.

Knutsen, Carl Henrik, Kyle L. Marquardt, Brigitte Seim, Michael Coppedge, Amanda Edgell, Juraj Medzihorsky, Daniel Pemstein, Jan Teorell, John Gerring, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2023. [“Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding.”](#) V-Dem Working Paper 140.

Morrison, Kelly, Martin Lundstedt, Yuko Sato, Vanessa A. Boese-Schlösser, Klas Markström, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2023. [“Chains in Episodes of Democratization.”](#) V-Dem Working Paper 141.

Pelke, Lars, and Janika Spannagel. 2023. [“Quality Assessment of the Academic Freedom Index: Strengths, Weaknesses, and How Best to Use It.”](#) V-Dem Working Paper 142.

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