

WINTER 2022/23

ESSAYS

INDIA'S UPRISING

The world's largest democracy, united as never before.

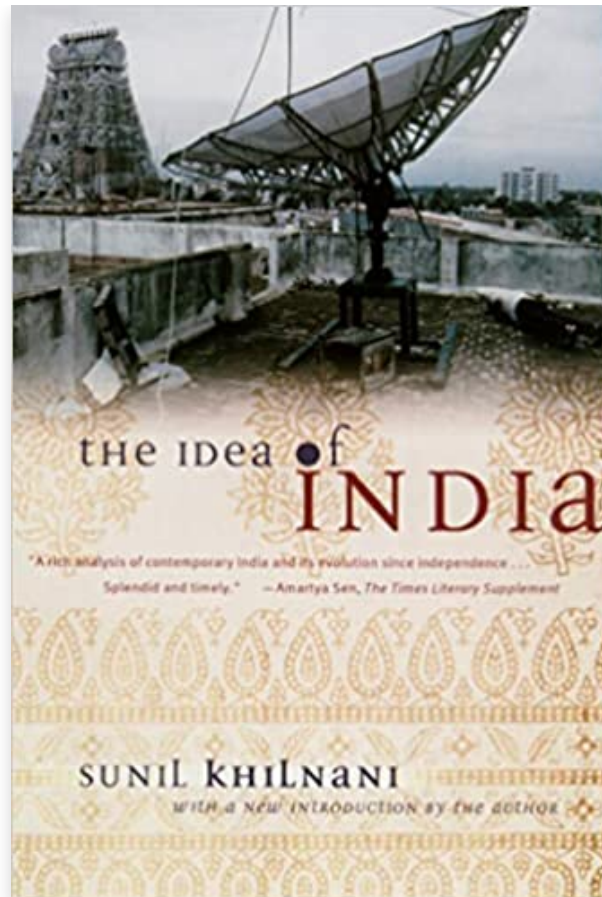
by Christopher Caldwell



सत्यमेव जयते

State Emblem of India, adopted 1950.
Design is based on architectural sculpture, the Lion Capital of Asoka at Sarnath, c. 250 BCE.
The motto Satyameva Jayate, which means 'Truth Alone Triumphs' is written in
Devanagari script.

REVIEWED

*The Idea of India*

LAST FALL AND WINTER, RAHUL GANDHI, A 52-YEAR-OLD MEMBER OF INDIA'S parliament, led thousands of people on a 146-day, 2,500-mile walk across India. Along the rural highways from southernmost coastal Kanyakumari to the foot of the Himalayas, parliamentary colleagues, election strategists, and local party hacks and gofers jostled bloggers and issue activists and plain old hikers. Though scarcely noticed outside of India, the Bharat Jodo Yatra—the “Unite India March”—was one of the great feats of mass mobilization in our time. It was a logistical triumph: preparing three square meals for an army of thousands; pitching camp in a new place each night, sometimes in the middle of big, run-down cities, sometimes in rural communities with untrustworthy water; setting up mattress-crammed tents where hundreds of marchers could nap en route, with party donors snoring away next to outstretched feminist intellectuals and recumbent Bhil tribal leaders; and above all keeping order and avoiding violence. Funny though the spectacle sometimes appeared to a non-Indian, it involved exactly the sort of organizing that a well-informed electorate looks for in a ruling party.

Rahul Gandhi is heir to one of the democratic world's great family dynasties, and to the party that it long controlled: the Indian National Congress, known colloquially as "Congress." He has for much of his career come off as feckless and even a bit apolitical; after leading the Congress himself for a couple of years, he stepped aside in 2019. His party's public image has been fading. In the late 20th century, India was, like Mexico, an odd mix between a democracy and a one-party state—which reflects as well on the party as it does poorly on the democracy. Today, some Congress supporters worry that their party is no longer really even a national one at all, so unpopular has it become in parts of the "cow belt" of pious Hindu villages that cover the Indian center and north. In the Dravidian south, strong local parties have arisen to defend a variety of local languages and cultures, not to mention a booming tech economy. And yet the march ran straight through some of the most Congress-skeptical of India's two-dozen federal states. In rural Madhya Pradesh, run by the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), people thronged the streets. Shopkeepers turned out. Aboriginal tribesmen and -women came from miles around. Mobs of men pushed chain-link fences for a closer look. Some held armfuls of floral garlands to throw. Women with covered heads lined the roadsides in their best saris, simple or snazzy. For Rahul Gandhi it was an act of great partisan courage.

And personal courage, too. Rahul's great-grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru, still beloved to progressives and socialists at home and abroad, became India's first prime minister when it emerged as a republic from British imperial rule in 1947. Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi, Rahul's grandmother, herself ran the Congress party and the country for almost two decades on Nehruvian principles, albeit with a harder and more authoritarian edge, until she was assassinated in 1984. ("Gandhi" is a fairly common Indian surname that Indira acquired through marriage; the family is not related to Mohandas Gandhi.) Rahul's father, Rajiv Gandhi, succeeded his mother and served out a five-year term as prime minister in the 1980s. In the following decade he too would be killed, blown up on a trip to Tamil Nadu by a suicide terrorist. In this dynastic and dangerous democracy, the Nehru-Gandhi family is a monarchical presence. It represents India as India-watchers have understood it for many generations. There is an understandable feeling among Rahul's supporters that he is destined to rule.

India United

But he is not destined to rule. The problem for his Congress party, and for the intellectuals and other march-joiners who would unite the country around the old Nehruvian "Idea of India," is that the country is in fact united as it has never been before—just around a different set of principles. Narendra Modi, the 72-year-old Hindu activist from Gujarat, has been prime

minister since 2014. His father was a railroad station tea seller. A rare member of India's "backward" castes to reach his country's top post, he is the antitype of the urbane Nehru, and the movement he leads is the antithesis of Congress as Nehru reshaped it. Under Modi's leadership the BJP, founded in 1980 and focused on the aspirations of the 80% of Indians who are Hindu, has become the world's largest political party. Political scientists say India has moved on to a "second party system" with the BJP at its center, much as the first party system was dominated by Congress.

India's tiny sliver of Western-connected English-language opinion-makers tend to find Modi appalling. Their minoritarian take has hardened into Western conventional wisdom about India: Modi is understood as a subcontinental Viktor Orbán or Donald Trump. He is a demagogue, a populist, a reactionary. Some accuse Modi of religious fundamentalism, or of bigotry against India's Muslims. He cares little for the rights of women and gays, say others. For certain opponents his sin is nationalism, for others it is cozying up to India's billionaire tech moguls and venture capitalists. As the marching thousands of the Congress party poured into a village called Ghatiya in rural Madhya Pradesh, one English-speaking intellectual said he was marching against Modi to prevent the "onslaught of fascism."

This is not how India's modestly situated monoglots see Modi. Nor does it make sense. Western populist leaders are all, in one way or another, trying to stem the decadence of their once-great countries. Modi's India has plenty of problems, but decadence isn't one of them. This winter it passed China as the world's largest country, and its population is poised to keep growing past mid-century. India has nuclear weapons. In a period of international tension it has managed to win ever-closer military cooperation with the United States, while engaging in ever-closer trade relations with Russia. It graduates more English-speaking science and tech professionals than any country on earth. It has vast urban areas with multiple millions of people that even well-educated Westerners may never have heard of—Vadodara, Indore, Visakhapatnam, Nashik—where you can, for better or for worse, shop at Forever 21 and eat at Taco Bell. This does not mean the country is Western, or even that it aspires to be. Signs in the modern subway in the capital city of Delhi instruct riders not to sit on the floor. In the winter months, curtains of gray smoke envelop Delhi, but not from industrial pollution. Peasant farmers, upwind in the state of Haryana, need to harvest rice and plant wheat in the same fields in the space of a few weeks, and do so by setting vast expanses of cropland on fire. From developers making a killing off the tech economy to pious villagers shocked at what their children are learning about sex on their cellphones, India is dividing into ever-better-organized

political pressure groups. How to keep all of them happy is not obvious. Modi has managed it better than any of his contemporaries.

The political advisory group Morning Consult keeps track of two dozen world leaders' popularity, and Modi is generally in a class by himself. In February he stood at 78% approval and 19% disapproval—extraordinary for a leader nine years into the job. Only Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, at 63%, is even in the ballpark. Joe Biden is at 40. Emmanuel Macron is at 27. Modi wins and wins big because Indians see him as the embodiment of a different idea of India, a majoritarian one that, necessarily or not, was suppressed in the 20th century.

The Gandhian Legacy

The Indian republic is the product of an uprising against a British Empire whose picturesqueness should not distract us from its brutality. The uprising was, naturally, a radical enterprise. Yet it was led by a conservative Hindu who fasted, prayed, and practiced celibacy, and who hated modern machinery. "It behoves every lover of India to cling to the old Indian civilisation even as a child clings to its mother's breast," wrote Mohandas Gandhi, the nationalist leader known as the Mahatma, or "great soul."

Gandhi was ruthless. Americans may think of his doctrine of *satyagraha*, or passive resistance, as having drawn on something they possess in abundance: niceness. No. On the contrary, it drew on things that are in very short supply in Western democracies: self-abnegation and a willingness to endure suffering and even violence. It was meant not to flatter or cajole the colonial occupier but, reasonably or not, to remove from him every last scrap of moral legitimacy.

There were two sides to Gandhi. We know him as an ecumenical progressive, and that he was: he wanted to enlist all of India's religions in building the new democracy—not just Hindus but also Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jains. He was willing to go quite far in accommodating Muslims, even campaigning for the restoration of the Ottoman caliphate, toppled after World War I.

But Gandhi was also a Hindu, a member of the majority. Mass democracy promised to be more complicated for religious minorities. Under the British raj, Muslims in particular, a quarter of the population, had been protected from Hindu numerical dominance by what we might call an equality of subjugation. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, a not particularly pious upper-crust Bombay Muslim, thought that Indian Islam was doomed unless Muslims could be granted

some kind of veto—an Indian version of what John C. Calhoun called a “concurrent majority.” The mass of Hindus was dead set against it. Failing that, Jinnah inclined toward a Muslim secession, the setting up of an independent Pakistan, which Gandhi was willing to do almost anything to prevent. Gandhi’s own goodwill may have blinded him to how difficult this would be.

Gandhi had two heirs apparent among the Congress movement’s freedom fighters. They vied jealously with one another. One was his fellow Gujarati lawyer Vallabhbhai “Sardar” Patel, a politician of almost preternatural practical abilities and an intense loyalty to Gandhi. The other was Nehru, privileged, educated at Harrow and Cambridge (where his friends called him “Joe”), charming, shaped by modern progressive doctrines and curious about the Soviet Union. The historian Sunil Khilnani gives an elegant summary in *The Idea of India* (1997) of the choice that faced Gandhi: “One [Patel] wanted the state simply to express and tend the existing pattern of India’s society, with all its hierarchy, particularity and religious tastes; the other [Nehru] hoped to use the state actively to reconstitute India’s society, to reform it and to bring it in line with what he took to be the movement of universal history.”

Gandhi chose Nehru. For devout Hindus this was a disappointment. Nehru was uninterested in religion and even suspicious of it. To use a distinction one often hears from Indian historians, the country was moving from Gandhi and Patel’s “all-religion secularism” to Nehru’s “no-religion secularism.” At just this moment, Nathuram Godse, a onetime Gandhi-ite disappointed in his former hero’s indulgence of Muslims, shot Gandhi dead in a garden in Delhi. Gandhi’s assassin had at one time been swept up in the activities of the National Volunteer Organization (RSS), the most important of the Hindu fellowships, and had also been a protégé of the radical historian Vinayak Damodar “Veer” Savarkar.

Historians differ on whether Godse any longer frequented the RSS, and on the nature of his contacts with Savarkar. But they do not differ on the upshot: in a single moment, the country’s overwhelming Hindu majority had lost its most important leader, and seen Hindu political assertiveness disgraced and discredited for what would turn out to be half a century. The most powerful political currents in republican India, the passions of hundreds of millions of people, would not even be in the political system’s field of vision.

The Nehru System

For much of the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, Nehru-style government hopped along on just one of its two Gandhian feet, the progressive one. Nehru’s preference was an economy along socialist

lines: five-year plans, lavishing state resources on heavy industry, extracting money from small-time businessmen through onerous licensing fees. People called the system the License Raj. Even those who honor Nehru's work in building democratic institutions consider his economic policies a catastrophe in retrospect. The Columbia University economist Arvind Panagariya, for instance, has written that India would have been better to follow the path the East Asian "tiger" economies did—to build its way into competitiveness by taking advantage of its most important resource: cheap labor. When Indira Gandhi took over from her father in 1966, she took an even more aggressive approach to planning. By 1981 the country was being propped up by loans from the International Monetary Fund, and currency controls meant that Indians traveling abroad were unable to carry much more money than it would take to buy a meal in a nice Western restaurant.

The Indian Constitution, one of the world's longest, was ratified in 1949. It managed the relationship between faiths much as the British raj had, giving each of India's major religions the leeway to run its own affairs. So an Indian Muslim, even today, has the liberty to practice polygamy, while an Indian Hindu does not. What was most innovative about the constitution was that it invented the modern practice of affirmative action. Its great conceptualizer and drafter was B.R. Ambedkar, a social-science polymath, a lecturer at Columbia University, a radical political reformer, and a *dalit*, or "untouchable," from the lowest reaches of India's complex caste system, against which he held an understandable grudge. One of the things that made the constitution so long is that it laid out a "schedule" of 1,109 castes and 775 aboriginal tribes who would be eligible for "reservations," or quotas, securing them a quarter of the seats in India's parliament and granting them a quarter of government jobs. But only government jobs—in this respect, India's affirmative-action system, however much it may have been belittled for its complexity, was actually less intrusive than the American one, with its litigation-fueled undermining of meritocracy in the private sector.

Hindus who were neither tribal nor religious minorities and belonged to one of the middling castes felt like white heterosexual males in the 21st-century United States—the constitution was a bag filled with goodies for everyone but them. They bitterly resented the Congress party's "vote banks": ethnic, religious, and caste blocs rallied by promises of government favor. Muslims were long especially loyal to Congress. The system might be said to have stabilized the country by allowing minorities, acting in concert, to tie down the Hindu goliath. But Hindus were discontented with it. And there was a potential danger: should the Hindu majority ever begin behaving like a patronage-seeking vote bank, as it had incentives to do, then the whole system might erupt.

Things began to destabilize. Indira Gandhi imposed martial law in 1974 when an opposition politician called her government unlawful, beginning a traumatic three years known as “The Emergency.” Over that time, and under pressure from Western governments, she initiated a population-control program that saw the forced sterilization of more than 6 million men. The 1977 election brought a shock victory for a coalition that included Hindu activists. The government was for the most part ineffectual, though it set up the so-called Mandal Commission, which a decade later would draw a new list of “other backward classes,” including Modi’s, into the system of reservations. When Indira returned to power in 1980, certain disappointed Hindus from the short-lived governing coalition broke off from it and founded the BJP. In the spring of 1984, Indira ordered a raid on the stronghold of the charismatic Sikh radical Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in Amritsar, during which he was killed. Four months later, Indira was assassinated by her machine gun-wielding Sikh bodyguards on the way to a TV interview with Peter Ustinov. Her supporters rioted in Delhi for four days, killing 2,800 Sikhs.

With religious contention of all kinds on the rise, Rajiv Gandhi was elected in 1984 in a landslide to replace his mother. His five-year term turned out to be the last hurrah of the Nehru/Gandhi dynasty. (His own assassination in 1991 would come later, after he had left office.) Rajiv’s most important legacy involved a 1985 Supreme Court case that divided Hindus from Muslims and still echoes down the decades. Shah Bano, a Muslim woman from Indore, was dumped and left penniless by her husband of 46 years. The court established a right to alimony for Muslim women—something Muslims had eschewed as contrary to Islamic law. This violation of Muslim religious autonomy brought Muslim outrage but Hindu approval. The fledgling BJP argued—and still does—for a “uniform civil code,” i.e., for treating all religions the same. In a Western context, as BJP supporters often point out, this would constitute liberalism, secularism, common sense. But in Indian (or at least Nehruvian) terms, it means a denial of Muslim rights.

Rajiv, now anxious over his Muslim vote bank, pushed a law through the legislature withdrawing the right to alimony. In 1986, anxious over the unexpected Hindu backlash, he promised to permit Hindu prayer in the Babri Masjid, a mosque in the holy city of Ayodhya. Hindus claimed it had been the site of a Hindu temple, before Muslim Moghul rulers conquered India in the 16th century. Two years later, Rajiv tried to make up with Muslims by banning the import of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, against which Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had just issued a fatwa. He concluded this period of vacillation by endorsing the construction of a Hindu temple in Ayodhya. That name would become the

symbol—glorious or frightening according to your views—of the uncompromising Hinduism Modi represented.

The Age of Ayodhya

Even today, many Indians have a hard time explaining exactly what it was about Ayodhya that, in 1992, turned Hindus toward a radical new kind of politics. It is worth noting that, in the mid-1980s, Doordarshan, the Indian public broadcaster, began showing television adaptations of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, two of Hinduism's ancient epics, and these seized the imagination of the whole country. Activists had become convinced that the Ayodhya mosque stood on the site of the birthplace of Rama (or Ram), an avatar (what a Westerner might call an incarnation) of the god Vishnu. Two groups now pushed for a Hindu mandir at Ayodhya: there was the RSS, the national Hindu activist group out of which Narendra Modi rose, founded in the 1920s and still active today, and there was a newer society called the Vishva Hindu Parishad, many of whose members were calling for the outright destruction of the existing mosque. The fledgling BJP, which after 1989 was part of the government, campaigned alongside them both. In late 1990, a country-crossing pilgrimage to Ayodhya by BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani culminated in Advani's arrest and the government's collapse. When Hindu protesters showed up in Ayodhya that December, soldiers opened fire on them twice in three days, killing dozens and outraging the public. The authorities were more lenient when 150,000 Hindus returned in 1992. That didn't work much better. The protesters overwhelmed security lines and attacked the complex with pickaxes. In a few hours the centuries-old mosque had been reduced to dust. Vinay Sitapati's recent history, *Jugalbandi: The BJP Before Modi* (2020), tells this story in spellbinding detail.

Ayodhya shocked the world, which continued to view India through a cosmopolitan/Nehruvian lens, but a large part of Hindu India was pleased. The Anglo-Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul said at the time that Babur, who had built the mosque, had

had contempt for the country he had conquered. And his building of that mosque was an act of contempt for the country.... The construction of a mosque on a spot regarded as sacred by the conquered population was meant as an insult, an insult to an ancient idea, the idea of Ram.

In retrospect, that was how Modi felt, too—in 2021 he would lay the cornerstone for a Hindu temple on the site of the mosque.

The destruction at Ayodhya was followed by Hindu-Muslim confrontations across India in which 2,000 people died. But the most serious fallout for Modi came a decade later, by which time he was serving as governor of Gujarat. In February 2002, a train full of Hindu activists returning from Ayodhya stopped in the Gujarati station of Godhra. Muslim toughs surrounded the train and lit it on fire, and all 59 of the pilgrims on board were incinerated. In hundreds of villages across Gujarat, Hindus went berserk; at the end of three nights, 2,000 people had been killed, 1,272 of them Muslim. Accounts of Modi's role have diverged widely. It has been alleged that he ordered the police not to intervene. Official inquiries undertaken long before he arrived at national power have exonerated him. Some even say he did well to control the violence in 72 hours, noting that there were more Sikhs killed in Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 than there were Muslims under Modi in the considerably more far-flung and harder-to-police state of Gujarat. Whether cautiously or credulously, the George W. Bush Administration accepted the anti-Modi view, denying him a U.S. visa in 2005. The Obama Administration lifted the ban.

Vinay Sitapati's account is subtle and paradoxical. India's human-rights activists and English-language press tried to present Modi as the scourge of Islam, in hopes of driving him out of politics. But there wasn't sufficient evidence to justify this, and describing him that way had the opposite effect on Hindus across India. They were now convinced that their Muslim fellow citizens had been swept up in a global religious war—this was, remember, just a few months after September 11, 2001—and that Modi was the only one who could protect Hindus. The BJP happened to be holding a convention in Goa a few weeks later. Moderate elements in the BJP, probably including Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, planned on calling on Modi to resign, but when Modi spoke the crowd gave him a deafening roar of support. From that point on, Modi was a national leader.

Hindutva and High Tech

Modi's detractors commonly call his party "Hindu nationalist." It would be better described as Hindu *and* nationalist. The BJP is built on the so-called Hindutva awakening of a century ago. In 1923 the Brahmin intellectual Veer Savarkar invented the term in a book called *Essentials of Hindutva*. Savarkar was a brilliant extremist. His history of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, *The Indian Revolution* (1909), was the first to reconceive that episode—quite correctly—as the start of a war of independence. The book was banned, and would not be republished until

India was independent in 1947. Savarkar was imprisoned in miserable conditions in the Andaman islands for, among other things, gun-smuggling and conspiring to murder a British official. He was, as we know, a mentor of Godse, Gandhi's killer. Two things are at first sight more surprising: First, he was an outspoken atheist. Second, he was an active public opponent of the caste system, which many outsiders to Hinduism consider essential to the religion. So Hindutva, as Savarkar launched it, refers to the culture of the land of India more than to Hinduism, and the politics that results from it is nationalist rather than theocratic.

In 1925, the physician K.P. Hedgewar founded the RSS to rally Hindu men to public service. They were soon meeting daily in 100,000 villages across India, as they still do, with an *esprit de corps* protected by an order of trained (and celibate) *pracharaks*, or "promoters." The RSS was conceived as an apolitical group, but its organizing power and sheer numbers have always made it a potential vote bonanza for Hindu parties, from the Jana Sangh in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s to the BJP today. And that is leaving aside the family of sympathetic organizations, the so-called Sangh Parivar, that grew up around it. Support from the RSS has transformed Hindutva from the hobby of a few Brahmin intellectuals into the largest mass political movement the world has ever seen. But this support has never been automatic. It seems more so today, but only because Modi himself rose out of the RSS, not out of traditional politics. He became a *pracharak* in 1972 (after a brief early marriage), and was detailed to the BJP by the RSS in the 1980s to help halt its drift toward moderation under leader (and eventual prime minister) Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

What is important about so-called Hindu nationalism is, first, its stunning practical capabilities—supporters and detractors liken the RSS's followers to "termites." And second, the BJP's nationalism, which is more important politically than its Hinduism. Nationalist politics no longer exist in quite this way in the United States, but those who remember the late 20th century will do better to think of Pat Buchanan than of Pat Robertson. It would give a misimpression of how Modi rules if we addressed religious questions first, because many aspects of Modi's regime resemble the familiar politics of Western countries.

India's electorate presents certain challenges to an elected official. It is a poor population, with a per capita income still under \$2,500 a year. But that population is in love with gadgetry, so Indian voters are wired into internet news and gossip and social media insults the way a rich country is. India has 750 million smartphones—60% of adults have them, roughly the American proportion of a decade ago. This networking is new—it was only in the 1990s that

literacy passed 50% nationwide, and that Indians were offered more than a single television channel for watching national news.

Like Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Modi sees himself as replacing a bureaucratic elite based in the capital with a more entrepreneurial elite based in the provinces. Like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, he is bent on using the state to give even those who don't agree with him a reason to vote for him. He has almost nothing in common with Donald Trump. Yes, Modi is ideological, but he is under too much scrutiny, and under too much pressure to improve living standards, to govern only through ideological stunts and inconsequential trolling. He must deliver practical improvements in living standards—or at least be seen to deliver them. So, in the final weekend before last December's state election in Gujarat, he traveled to Goa to open the new international airport and address the World Ayurveda Congress; then to the Maharashtrian city of Nagpur (population 3 million) to launch the first stage of a new subway system, a new expressway, a new railway, and a new pollution abatement plant; and finally to his native state to dedicate a Metro line in Ahmedabad (population 6 million) and a canal in Kutch.

India, while dirty and disorderly in places, is not the nightmare of standing water and sidewalk defecation that travelers routinely described a generation ago. Modi has installed hundreds of millions of taps, toilets, and gas lines in hundreds of millions of houses. A good number of the BJP's signature programs, particularly in tech matters, are not its own inventions but were inherited from previous governments. Modi's contribution has been to scale them up, often for reasons of combatting corruption. "Demonetization"—withdrawing large-denomination bills from circulation to fight money-laundering—was tried in the 1970s. The BJP did it again in 2016 to much ridicule abroad, but authorities claim the move worked, and opinion polls show no lasting resentment at the inconvenience. A cellphone payments system was launched more than a decade ago, which Modi has bundled with the welfare system, the banking system, and a controversial facial recognition software. In about a year and a half almost a billion people were equipped with a "Unique ID Authority" and a bank account. So, you can use your cell phone to pay your light bill, buy a car, or give money to a beggar. You can board a plane in several airports by just looking into a camera. India now accounts for 40% of the world's digital transactions.

This digitization has come at a worrisome cost in privacy. On the other hand, it has indeed done a great deal to curb corruption. Village political bosses have been prevented from taking a cut from welfare recipients. Administrators can no longer boost school funds by putting fictional pupils on the rolls. Probably the worst symbol of the corruption of Indian democracy

until a few years ago was that votes in far-flung states were often not tallied until days after elections took place. Now they can be counted in three hours or so, and are available on election night. In this sense, India is a Third World country no more.

Ridiculous Diplomacy

India has one of the world's simpler foreign policies. Freshly emerged from colonial domination, working with limited financial resources, it has not been inclined to participate in "outside wars." India stayed out of Iraq and the various iterations of the U.S. war on terror. It declares it has no permanent alliances, though that is not wholly true. It leaned heavily on the Soviet Union, starting in the 1970s, developing a dependence on Russian military hardware that lasted until the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014. It continues to buy Russian weaponry, albeit at a lower rate. Today, India is a member, alongside Japan, Australia, and the United States, of the informal "Quad" group meant to tame China's global ambitions. And its problems with China may draw it closer still to the United States.

India has a 2,100-mile-long border with China, over which it lost a war in 1962, a humiliating final act in Nehru's career that saw him drawn overconfidently into battle like a subcontinental Napoleon III. Today, there are 50,000 troops on each side of the border. Over the last three years they have engaged in a series of odd clashes. Seemingly instructed not to fire on one another, they have nonetheless hurled insults, exchanged blows, and wound up in rumbles in which dozens of soldiers have been punched and clubbed and stoned to death. The last such encounter came in December in Arunachal Pradesh. As China declares its intention to project power abroad with a "blue-water" navy, as it sends its ships to friendly ports in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, India is starting to feel encircled.

That does not mean India is ready to break its rule against outside conflicts and help the United States wage war against Russia in Ukraine. India depends on Russian energy and, just as much, on Ukrainian fertilizer. Its rationale for rejecting U.S. sanctions is that the war is the result of a diplomatic failure between Russia and NATO—not something a poor, uninvolved country like India should pay the price for. India is importing almost five times as much oil from Russia as it did before, and at bargain prices. But the country's capable foreign minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar insisted to *The New York Times* last winter that that was still only one sixth of the Russian energy that Europe continues to import: "If a \$60,000-per-capita society feels it needs to look after itself..." he said, "they should not expect a \$2,000-per-capita society to take a hit."

Principles aside, many Indian diplomats believe the United States is destroying the foundations of the global system it built up. Knocking Russia out of the SWIFT payment system, sanctioning the foreign minister and families of Duma members: “This is an emotional, ridiculous way to conduct diplomacy,” said one in an off-the-record conversation in Delhi last fall.

Against Lutyens’ Delhi

There is one thing about Modi’s role as India’s leader that modern Westerners will find especially foreign: that his lack of a family should be something to boast about. Modi is single and childless, though he was married briefly in 1968—something the public discovered only when he was required to disclose it before the 2014 elections. In the United States, bachelorhood is reason to worry that a politician is a weirdo. In India’s 75-year history, though, all parties, even the most democratic among them, have turned into family concerns—with Communists and the BJP accounting for the only long-running exceptions. Modi’s bachelorhood argues for his incorruptibility.

Modi is constantly presenting himself as the scourge of “Lutyens’ Delhi,” using the name of the English architect who designed the imposing governmental buildings that served as the seat of power in the last days of the British Empire—and do still. It is Modi’s contention that elite journalists, NGO activists, and lawyers exercise the old imperial prerogatives instinctively. He calls them the “Khan Market Gang,” after the expensive Bohemian neighborhood where they shop for books and snack on un-Indian things like avocado toast and cappuccino. There they are now, sitting in the Turtle Café, complaining—after 75 years of imposing their school chums and law partners on universities, boardrooms, and the Indian public—that the Modi government has “captured” their institutions.

Today’s Hindu uprising is not always motivated by specifically Hindu things. It is often just a wish that elitist institutions be replaced by something more representative—something that allows hitherto excluded people to feel a certain amount of pride in their background. A frequent complaint of V.S. Naipaul was that India was the only country that expected its authoritative histories and national myths to be written by foreigners. This fall the first medical school textbook was published in Hindi—the language of a scientifically inclined population of 600 million people. Modi’s home minister, Amit Shah, attended the launch party. The historian Mukul Kesavan, though far from a supporter of Modi, noted nonetheless that the “hyper-educated liberals” of the subcontinent were almost totally ignorant of Hindi fiction, poetry, and journalism. He laments: “When a demagogue like Modi takes a swipe at the likes of

[Nobel-winning Harvard economist] Amartya Sen with a motto like ‘hard work is better than Harvard,’ knowing anglophones might snigger but it resonates amongst people who have been at the receiving end of this privileged knowingness forever.”

Modi is constantly showing his people that it’s their turn to set the cultural tone. The conservative founding father Sardar Patel, for instance, was a footnote in the Nehruvian narrative of India’s history until 2018, when Modi unveiled a statue of Patel in Gujarat. It is taller by far than any ever built—twice the height of the Statue of Liberty, even if you include the pedestal. Modi is purging non-native or non-Hindu cultural symbols with the zeal of a Black Lives Matter activist in a city full of Confederate statues. He has started with Delhi’s streets: Rajpath, with its reference to British colonial rule, has been renamed Kartavya Path. Aurangzeb Road, named after the Muslim emperor who ruled Moghul India three and a half centuries ago, has a new (albeit still Muslim) eponym—Abdul Kalam, the late rocket scientist and Indian president. The English hymn “Abide with Me,” beloved of Gandhi and traditionally performed by a military band on India’s annual Republic Day, was axed from the program last year.

Although the BJP’s Hindu ideology is not necessarily radical, the voters’ *democratic* mood can be very radical indeed. That the BJP is in power in the first place means that the old “managed” democracy of the Congress party system has been replaced with a more freewheeling variant—a more democratic democracy, if you will, a democracy that answers not to “values” but to the society as it actually exists. That society is multicultural and multi-religious, yes, but it is also gossippy, hot-tempered, and among the most pious societies on earth. Eighty percent of people pray once a day, according to a survey by the Pew Center on Religion.

Mathematical Considerations

In a multicultural democracy, any community’s loss of clout, often through relative demographic decline, will be taken as a threat to its way of life. Democracy then quite naturally takes on a military cast, or at best a diplomatic one. Like a number of parties holding power in divided democracies—like Fidesz in Hungary offering citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in eastern Europe, or like the Democratic Party slackening immigration controls in the United States—the BJP connives at improving its demographic position. It has passed a Citizenship Amendment Act, which privileges Hindu refugees over others. In the state of Karnataka, the high court is deciding whether a Muslim couple can legally adopt a Hindu woman’s child. Such arguments escalated in intensity last May, when Shraddha Walkar, a 27-year-old Hindu woman, was murdered by her Muslim boyfriend Aaftab Poonawalla, who chopped her body

into 35 pieces and scattered it in the woods. Modi's supporters often describe such episodes as "love jihad." The newspapers have been full of it.

Misgivings about conversion of any kind, under any circumstances, are a perennial feature of Indian life. Nine states have anti-conversion laws. BJP-sympathetic Indians are adamant that the original meaning of Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, concerning freedom of religion, does not include a freedom to convert. Christianity can be held in suspicion. An Australian missionary, Graham Staines, was set on fire with his two sons in Orissa in 1999. But overwhelmingly, it is Islam that most engages the passions of BJP members. The country is only 2% Christian, after all, and 14% Muslim. Islam, moreover, was at the root of India's bloody partition from Pakistan in the last century, and today's Indians worry about Islamist movements as much as Westerners do. Most Muslims in India are descendants of those converted during the Moghul conquests from the 16th century onward. In Punjab, in the two generations before independence, the Hindu population dropped from 44% of the population to 29%, due to conversions to Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. And in 1981 the entire Tamil Nadu town of Meenakshipuram, hundreds strong, converted to Islam. The rise of a more popular democracy has dramatically exacerbated worries on this front.

The Meenakshipuram case involves an important element of BJP rule—the element of caste. The hundreds who converted to Islam there were untouchables. The option of conversion, broadly understood, is precisely what democracy and freedom of association are supposed to place before citizens, albeit in a more individual way. After two generations, this logic has become apparent to Indians outside of elites. They are growing more obstreperous because they are growing freer. But once you have a marketplace of cultures and especially faiths, the Hindu world is at risk of getting deserted by its subordinate members. This would be the movement's Achilles heel if its leaders were not careful. As British historian Perry Anderson has noted in *The Indian Ideology* (2012), Gandhi understood that in a democracy there are "mathematical" considerations requiring the Hindu side to seek the votes of lower castes. Savarkar himself saw that, if India were to be a real democracy, then the writing would be on the wall for the old caste system. The BJP is not stupid: the currency in which people expect to be compensated for their votes is equality.

Because Hindu radicalism in the 20th century was the province of nostalgic Brahmins, many analysts have assumed the BJP was a party of upper-caste elites. We now know better. Of the 303 BJP members in the Parliament's lower house now, 63% belong either to scheduled castes and tribes, or to the group of Other Backward Castes that includes Modi's. As the political

scientist Nalin Mehta has argued in his indispensable recent work, *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party* (2022), this caste revolution is an undiscussed key to the BJP's rise. The party can wage its campaign to unravel the special constitutional rights of Muslims only because it has the backing of voters who want the social revolution it is waging on behalf of Hindus of lower caste.

The BJP revolution is a democratic uprising taking place under idiosyncratic conditions. It is both more innocent and more dangerous than it looks. It happened because India's government for too long took no account of its majority's ethnic identity. Hindu grievances were delegitimized as bigotry, and left to fester until Hindu politicians and activists laid hold of powerful symbols like Ayodhya, and an important part of the majority began to vote like minorities. By then it was too late for the Congress party and other Indian elites to talk them back into the hold.

The problem of respecting the decisions of majorities while defending the rights of minorities is an anthropological one, not a moral one. We like to pretend that, when it comes to balancing majority and minority interests, there is a knowable "right thing to do." Often there isn't. We also like to pretend that protecting minorities always means protecting them against abuse and persecution by majorities. Sometimes it does. But just as often it means claiming prerogatives for minorities against the innocent preferences of democratic majorities. When progressive change is about protecting minorities from majorities, it can become not just undemocratic but anti-democratic. It may be *for* the people, but it will not be *of* the people or *by* the people. Eventually it draws the people directly into the political fight, to unpredictable effect.

Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books and the author, most recently, of *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties* (Simon & Schuster).

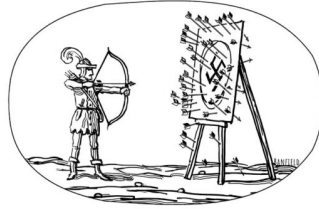
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Crisis politics and the California drought.



WE'RE TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST ALL WRONG

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A problem of human nature.



THE DISPUTED QUESTION WINTER 2022/23

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