

Christophe Jaffrelot. Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. 639. Hardcover, \$35.00.

In *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* Christophe Jaffrelot explores Narendra Modi's rise to power as Prime Minister and what has unfolded since his election. The book is organized in three parts.

In Part I, Jaffrelot familiarizes the reader with Hindu nationalism, its history and articulations and of the organizations advancing its cause, e.g., the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Modi's populism exploits the Hindu fear of vulnerability and "the reactivation of the Hindu majoritarian inferiority complex" (p. 74). Once in control of Gujarat Modi weaponized this fear by turning it into anger against the Muslim minority, "(e)thnic nationalism...draws from a wellspring of resentment" (p. 79). In Gujarat Modi consolidated power, fostering loyalty across caste lines by a mixture of the exploitation of fear of the other, promises of economic advancement and expanding alliance with the RSS and its affiliate groups.

In his run for Prime Minister, Modi appealed to disposed Hindus including those negatively affected by "positive discrimination" (p. 108), i.e., policies designed to provide access to those locked out of social advancement by India's caste structure and those threatened by the modernization process (e.g., men made uneasy by women's progress). He promised to lift the economic prospects of the nation using the same techniques that had led to economic transformation in Gujarat. His populism exploits long standing Hindu nationalist organizations and he creates an expansive support network to penetrate the country with personal and virtual communications. His organization numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Following his election as Prime Minister, Modi worked to personalize his relationship with Indians *writ large* (minus Muslims and other minorities). He employed politics of "dignity"

(p. 113) to touch the lives of hundreds of millions (e.g., providing toilets so that human waste expulsion could be done in private) while his policies led to the deepening of poverty in rural areas. He speaks to Indians as his friends. His dignity campaigns, appeals to Hindu nationalist virtues, and adept presentation of self, work to obscure the rising wealth gap that rampant “crony” (p. 143) and “collusive” capitalism (p. 147) fosters.

In Part II, Jaffrelot discusses Modi’s first-term India as a “de facto ethnic democracy” (p. 155). He begins by examining how India’s secular state transformed slowly, first by attacking India’s Muslims with “cow protection laws” (p. 160), and then by an outright challenge to “the secularism enshrined in the Constitution” (p. 165). The RSS methodically penetrated the government, Hindutva infiltrated public education, leaving liberals and universities under attack, while NGOs have been pressured and closed. Christians, like Muslims, have become objects of persecution as the conversion of Hindus to other religions and inter-religious marriages are targeted (e.g., the campaign against “Love Jihad,” p. 195).

Under Modi’s leadership, vigilantism against his opponents has also been unleashed. Moral policing runs rampant. Law enforcement ignores the violence perpetrated on behalf of Hindu nationalism. Jaffrelot writes, “Low intensity communal riots...aimed to polarize the electorate along religious lines” (p. 223) become a constant. A “vulgarization of power” (p. 234) unfolds as the efforts of militias blend with the activities of public authorities. Journalists and academics are targeted and violence in support of Hindu nationalism become “a legitimate mode of action” (p. 247).

In the third and final part of the book, Jaffrelot recounts how the world’s largest democracy is being transformed (or has been transformed) into a form of “competitive authoritarianism” (p. 253). Institutional forms of power (e.g., Lok Sabha, Central Bureau of

Investigation, Supreme Court) have been coopted or neutralized. The opposition press has all but disappeared, and the members of opposition parties have been poached or have come to incorporate Hindu nationalist themes. The search for Islamic infiltrators is never ending and used to maintain an exploitable fear in the population while any mention of “Hindu terrorism” (p. 318) is swiftly squashed.

In the middle of all this unfolding history is Modi, a gifted orator and populist leader who has mobilized modern technology in a way that leaders across the globe will emulate. He is a man of the people, a person of humble origins that has exploited the extant Hindu nationalist structures to move Hindu nationalism at a pace, and into places, no other BJP leader dared to have done before him. He has fostered such an intense “anti-Muslim bias” that even “attacks on mosques are blamed on Islamists” (p. 424). Modi has created an India with “attributes of a police state” (p. 465).

This is an exceptional book. Its use of theory is rich and well-applied. It is a powerful case study of how a populist leader can significantly reframe the operations of government to diminish or eliminate democratic operations in a democratic state. Its detailed history is impressive. The sources cited are expansive. It is more sophisticated and nuanced than can be related in this review. This book would be appropriate for graduate level classes addressing populism, classes focused on India and South Asia as well as those focused on the thorny issue of Indo-Pak relations. It is a must-read for South Asian scholars and may be a good case study for graduate classes investigating class relations, populism and social movements. I recommend it highly.

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