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Roy, Indrajit orcid.org/0000-0002-1583-6244 (2024) *India: Making and resisting an ethnocracy*. *India Review*. pp. 177-196. ISSN 1557-3036

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2024.2341568>

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To cite this article: Indrajit of Roy (2024) India: the making and resisting of an ethnocracy, *India Review*, 23:3, 177-196, DOI: [10.1080/14736489.2024.2341568](https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2024.2341568)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2024.2341568>



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Published online: 22 May 2024.



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India: the making and resisting of an ethnocracy

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ABSTRACT

India today exemplifies the making of an “ethnocracy,” a polity in which the dominant ethnic group obtains political control and deploys the state apparatus to ethnicize territory and society. I illustrate the making of India's ethnocracy by documenting key political and policy practices of Narendra Modi's rule. I do this by offering evidence of this process by documenting: (1). the contest between the dominant Hindus and minority Muslims over territorial space and the public realm; (2). solidifying Hindutva ethno-nationalism; which builds on and consolidates; and (3). long-term political and economic stratification between Hindus and Muslims. However, the making of India's ethnocracy has not gone unchallenged. Therefore, I direct attention to the resistance mounted against India's ethnocratic turn in the institutional, political and social terrains.

Introduction

In recent years, India's credentials as a liberal democracy have been seriously questioned. In March 2021, Freedom House downgraded its status from “free” to “partly free.” This decline was attributed to “a multiyear pattern in which the Hindu nationalist government and its allies have presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters” (Freedom House, 2021). Within a few weeks, the *Varieties of Democracy Report* noted India's slide from being the world's largest democracy to an electoral autocracy.¹

Prescient observers of Indian politics had long seen this decline coming. Accounts of India faltering in its commitment to a liberal, pluralistic, democratic order are gaining prominence.² In particular, India's lurch toward a Hindu state has been noted³ as the country took on the characteristics of an “ethnic democracy.”⁴ A 2019 amendment to India's citizenship laws, which explicitly links membership of the political community to religious identity, departs from the 1950 Constitution's affirmation of secularism and equal rights for all and further the rise of an “ethnic state.”⁵ Indeed, as I argue in this paper, such moves signal India's transition from the world's largest democracy to an ethnocracy in which “a dominant ethnos gains political

control and uses the state apparatus to ethnicize the territory and society in question.”⁶

In this paper, I first introduce the concept of “ethnocracy” and outline its key distinguishing features from the formulation of “ethnic democracy” that has sometimes been used to analyze India’s deviation from liberal democracy. In the second section, I illustrate the making of an ethnocracy in India by documenting key political and policy practices of Narendra Modi’s rule. The third section offers glimpses into the ways in which the making of this ethnocracy is contested across the country.

Defining an ethnocracy

Ethnocracy is defined by the development sociologist Oraon Yiftachel as the specific expression of nationalism “where a dominant ethnos gains political control and uses the state apparatus to ethnicize the territory and society in question.”⁷ Yiftachel clarifies that ethnocracies are neither democratic nor authoritarian. Citizenship is unequal and rests on laws that enable the capture of the state by one ethnic group. Ethnocratic states- such as Israel, Sri Lanka and Malaysia- frame policies that rigidify distinctions between: (1). A social group that is considered the core of the nation; (2). Groups that are considered peripheral and external to the nation. Three further features distinguish ethnocracies from other regimes: (1). A contest between the dominant ethnos and minority groups over territorial space and the public realm; (2). A rigid ethnonationalism; and (3). Long-term political and economic stratification between ethnic groups.⁸

An alternative formulation, advanced by Christophe Jaffrelot⁹ notes that “India increasingly demonstrates a key feature of an ethnic democracy and associated two-tiered citizenship, with the Hindu majority enjoying more *de jure* and *de facto* rights than the Muslim minority.”¹⁰ Drawing on Sammy Smootha’s elegant formulation, he defines 10 conditions that can lead to the establishment of an ethnic democracy: 1) The core ethnic nation constitutes a solid numerical majority; 2) the noncore population constitutes a significant minority; 3) the core ethnic nation has a commitment to democracy; 4) the core ethnic nation is an indigenous group; 5) the noncore groups are immigrants; 6) the noncore group is divided into more than one ethnic group; 7) the core ethnic nation has a sizable and supportive diaspora; 8) the noncore groups’ homelands are involved; 9) a transition from a nondemocratic ethnic state has taken place; 10) ethnic democracy enjoys international legitimacy. Katherine Adeney (2020) demonstrates the existence of a majority of these conditions for India. As¹¹ she notes, Hindu nationalists define the ethnoreligious majority as India’s eternal heir while rejecting religious minorities as outsiders.

While the formulation of “ethnic democracy” usefully cautions against an uncritical acceptance of India as a liberal democracy, it also downplays the extent to which democracy in India is reduced to the shell of holding regular elections. As Ghanem et al. (1998)¹² note in their response to Smootha’s original formulation of Israel as an “ethnic democracy,” a polity based on the structural exclusion of a section of its populism cannot reasonably be said to qualify as a democracy. To be sure, the dominant ethnic groups in ethnocracies value democracy (at least for themselves). They may even take pride in their democratic institutions and hold them up as values of which they are proud. But the systemic exclusion of ethnic minorities precludes these polities from being considered democratic. Recent events in India make it imperative for us to take seriously the category of “ethnocracy” when reflecting on India’s democratic decline.

Having outlined the key features of an ethnocracy and distinguished it from an “ethnic democracy,” I now illustrate the ways in which political and policy practices under Modi exemplify the making of an ethnocracy in India. Against arguments that India has been an ethnic democracy since its inception,¹³ or indeed a crypto-ethnic democracy¹⁴ or that India has never been a liberal democracy,¹⁵ this section outlines the specific ways in which India is being made into an ethnocracy under Modi. In line with Yiftachel’s¹⁶ formulation of an ethnocracy, I first outline the way Hindus are being consolidated as forming the core of the Indian nation, and religious minorities are identified as threats. Thereafter, I illustrate the intensifying territorial contests between Hindus and Muslims, the Hindutva ethno-nationalism that permeates Indian political discourse today, and the long-standing political-economic stratification between Hindus and Muslims, which threatens to widen under the BJP’s rule. In conclusion, I reflect on the mechanisms through which India’s emerging ethnocracy is being challenged.

In May 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) decisively won India’s General Elections and stormed to power. BJP leader Narendra Modi was anointed India’s Prime Minister. Soon thereafter, Modi took the unprecedented step of celebrating his victory on the banks of the River Ganga in the holy town of Varanasi. Varanasi was the parliamentary constituency that elected him, so it was to be expected that he would thank his voters. However, the spectacle of the Prime Minister, accompanied by senior colleagues who would go on to assume key cabinet portfolios, unapologetically flaunting his Hindu nationalist credentials was a clear break with the past. To be sure, India’s heads of government- even when personally agnostic-frequented places of worship on key occasions and regularly greeted the country on religious occasions but the political association with religion as an *inaugural act* was rare. A few weeks further, addressing India’s parliament for the first time as Prime Minister, Modi referred to “1200 years of servitude” that Indians had suffered, making a not-so-subtle reference to the presence of

Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and associated accounts of conquest, plunder and domination by invaders of the Islamic faith.

Hindus as the core group of the Indian nation and religious minorities as threats

Modi's early actions offered a glimpse into his future years in office in which Hindus would come to be considered the core group of the Indian nation and religious minorities regarded as threats. The most important contribution to India's ethnocentric transition stems from the ideological role of the RSS in government. Established in 1925, the RSS strives to organize society in accordance with and ensure the protection of the Hindu Dharma, or way of life. In 2019, the RSS claimed to have 85,000 *shakhas*¹⁷ or cells in which members are trained in physical combat and organizational ideology,¹⁸ and over 15 formal affiliates, including the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), and Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), which are the largest student and workers' unions in India, respectively.¹⁹

Modi himself was a member of the RSS from 1971 to 1987,²⁰ and has credited it with having shaped his own political and cultural views (Modi, 2014). Forty-one of 66 cabinet members in Modi's first government were drawn from the RSS. That proportion increased in his second government: now 38 of 53 members of Modi's cabinet have a background in the RSS in Modi's second government.²¹ Such influence of the RSS on any government in Independent India is unprecedented. The RSS' commitment to Hindutva or "Hindu-ness"²² at the expense of religious minorities is clear from a reading of its "vision and mission statement" that is publicly available on its website. Invoking the words of its founder, the statement declares:

The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindusthan. It is therefore clear that if Hindusthan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. If the Hindu culture perishes in Hindusthan itself, and if the Hindu society ceases to exist, it will hardly be appropriate to refer to the mere geographical entity that remains as Hindusthan. Mere geographical lumps do not make a nation. The entire society should be in such a vigilant and organised condition that no one would dare to cast an evil eye on any of our points of honour. RSS, 2012²³

The RSS' vision and mission statement endorses their founder's reference to India as "Hindusthan," a cultural term to refer to the land of the Hindus. This use of spelling cleverly manipulates the more common use of the term "Hindustan," which is of Persian origin and also refers to India as the "land of the Hindus" but in a pluralistic rather than unitary sense. The RSS celebrates Hindu culture as the "life-breath" of the country, thereby privileging it over other cultural influences that have shaped the country. The statement goes on to identify Muslims and Christians as potential threats to the Indian nation.

Conjointly with Independence, parts of Punjab, Bengal, Sindh and the Frontier areas [a reference to Muslim-majority areas that were awarded to Pakistan under the terms of India's violent Partition] were sundered from Bharat [the Sanskrit term for India]; and, four and a half decades after the nation's attaining freedom, [Muslim-majority] Kashmir remains a thorn in the flesh.

Continuous efforts have been there to make Assam a Muslim majority province. Likewise, no-holds-barred efforts to proselytize by Christian missions continue unabated. Even armed revolt has been engineered (e.g., in Nagaland) to carve out independent Christian provinces. Such activities receive ready support and unlimited funds from foreign countries and agencies keenly interested in destabilizing Bharat for their own ends. RSS, 2012.

The territorial dimension of India's emerging ethnocracy

The RSS' "vision and mission statement" is replete with allusions of territorial contests between Hindus and Muslims. The partition of the country between Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan continues to be a source of anxiety for the RSS: the loss of Muslim-majority territories is invoked in a bid to safeguard the Hindu territories that comprise independent India. The Muslim-majority region of Kashmir, which enjoyed a semi-autonomous status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, was singled out as "a thorn in the flesh" (despite insurgencies against the Indian state in other non-Muslim majority regions). The RSS' opposition to this semi-autonomous status was reflected in repeated promises in the BJP manifesto to abrogate it once elected to power.

In line with this perspective, Modi's government abolished Article 370²⁴ on August 5, 2019, within months of returning to power. Politicians across the state, including supporters of its accession to India, were placed under house arrest, the internet was suspended and people were placed under a lockdown that continues today.²⁵ Even as critics challenged²⁶ the new law as unconstitutional, the nationalist overtones of the move promised to unite the country behind a single idea of India where there is no special dispensation for different areas.²⁷ The country's only Muslim-majority State was not only deprived of its autonomous status but also stripped of its statehood. It was bifurcated into two Union Territories, to be administered directly from Delhi rather than by elected legislators as other Indian States. Indeed, this move illustrates a strategy to *subordinate* Muslim-majority territories to Hindu-majority ones.

RSS anxieties over the loss of Muslim-majority territories to Pakistan shape the government's attitude toward Muslims in Hindu-majority States as well. The emphasis on Assam in the "vision and mission statement" is noteworthy: it is borne of the claim that its 34% Muslim minority would overwhelm the State over time. It is therefore unsurprising that, as Khosla and Vaishnav have detailed, Assam has emerged as a key territorial battleground over the recent

attempts at enumerating a National Register for Citizens (NRC) and the amendments to citizenship laws in the country. Indeed, a key feature of the recent amendments to citizenship laws is that “one religion- Islam- is put on a lower footing than others.”²⁸ Under the terms of the amendment Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and Christians from neighboring Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh can apply to obtain Indian citizenship after 5 years of residing in the country, while Muslims must wait 11 years. The amendment thus makes naturalization harder for Muslims than for others.

An emerging campaign against a so-called “land jihad” neatly illustrates the territorial dimension of India’s emerging ethnocracy permeating neighborhoods and localities across the country. Claims of a “land jihad” are beginning to permeate electoral campaigns in Assam (even as this piece is written) as the BJP leader promises the electorate:

We are going all out against “land jihad.” Certain elements have grabbed land from us in lower and middle Assam. They have not even spared the monasteries. This will definitely feature in our manifesto. Times of India, 2021²⁹

The bogey of “land jihad” targets Muslims who seek to buy property in Hindu-majority neighborhoods. It has been invoked in regions as far afield as Jammu (north-west), Meerut (north), and Bangalore (south-west) not only by such RSS affiliates as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad but also independent citizens’ forums and journalists like Sudhir Chaudhury of the popular Zee News. The allegation is that Muslims buy property in Hindu residential areas with the purpose of reducing them to a minority. Campaigns against “land jihad” are couched as efforts to safeguard the Hindu character of neighborhoods. Protagonists claim that such efforts are indispensable to prevent territories from becoming “mini-Pakistans,” the epithet commonly used to describe Muslim-majority localities across Indian cities (Times of India, 2015).

A pervasive ethnonationalism

Ethno-nationalism, rooted in Hindutva, has come to pervade political discourse since Modi’s ascendance to power. Modi described himself as a “Hindu nationalist” in a rare interview on the eve of the 2014 elections. The BJP’s election manifesto declared that “India shall remain a natural home for persecuted Hindus, and they shall be welcome to seek refuge here.”³⁰

Such Hindutva ethno-nationalism is distinct from secular nationalism, which draws on an *Indian* rather than a Hindu identity, and constitutes the second element of the emerging ethnocracy. Hindutva ethnonationalism targets religious and social minorities as internal enemies as much if not more than external enemies. Thus, Muslims and (to a lesser extent) Christians find themselves at the receiving end of Hindutva ethnonationalism. Indeed, anyone who does not conform to the image of

a good Hindu can find themselves singled out as the internal enemy. In recent years, the list of internal enemies has come to include liberals, leftists and even Hindu religious leaders challenging the BJP's understanding of Hinduism (such as the Arya Samaj monk and social activist Swami Agnivesh); activists who have raised issues of the environment and human rights; and anyone else perceived to be "anti-national." Dissent is muzzled, increasingly through official edicts: the list of people incarcerated on one pretext or the other include 80-year-old human rights activist Varavara Rao and Disha Ravi, a 21-year-old environmental activist among others.

Cow protection

The BJP's first term in power witnessed the proliferation of "cow protection squads" across the north and west of the country.³¹ The cow is sacred to many Hindus, and has been a symbol of Hindu identity politics since the nineteenth century.³² Since 2015, cow protection vigilantes have accused at least 44 people of slaughtering bovines or eating beef and harassed, humiliated, beaten and even killed them. Most of the victims were from Muslim or Dalit (historically stigmatized as "untouchable") communities, both of which depend on cows for their livelihood³³ and sometimes food.³⁴ A ghastly episode of lynching was unveiled in September 2015, when Mohammed Akhlaq, a Muslim man in Dadri village in western Uttar Pradesh, was lynched on the suspicion that he had stored beef in his fridge.³⁵ Another horrifying episode emerged in July 2016, when seven Dalit laborers who were carrying cattle carcasses in the village of Una were rounded up by cow protection squads, stripped, dragged through the streets and thrashed with iron rods³⁶ In a telling measure of the impunity they enjoy, some of the members of the squad filmed the entire episode and uploaded it on social media as a warning to all those who slaughter cows and eat their meat.

The cow protection squads exemplify Hindutva ethno-nationalism under the BJP. Several states have taken it upon themselves to enforce local laws prohibiting cow slaughter. Some of these laws were introduced by Congress governments but rarely implemented. The cow protection squads have made cattle slaughter a central plank of their ethno-nationalist agenda, specifically targeting Muslims (and sometimes Dalits). Muslim cattle breeders and transporters are systematically targeted: Jaffrelot (2019)³⁷ reports that 24 of the 28 people killed by cow protection squads have been Muslim. The acts of lynching are typically accompanied by perpetrators forcing victims to chant Hindutva slogans such as "Jai Shri Ram" (Hail Lord Ram) and "Gau Mata ki Jai" (Hail the mother cow). Defending the cow protection squads, the chairperson of the state-run National Cow Commission- who also happens to be a member of the RSS- praised their "help in legal transaction of cows."³⁸

Love jihad

Another illustration of the rigid ethno-nationalism in India today comes from the contentions over inter-religious relationships, decried as “Love Jihad.” Love Jihad refers to the alleged strategy of Muslim men wooing and marrying Hindu women with the aim of then converting them to Islam, thereby waging a demographic *jihad* (crusade) against Hinduism. In September 2014, soon after Modi took office as Prime Minister, the RSS published cover stories on “Love Jihad” in its weekly mouthpieces- the *Organiser* of English and *Panchajanya* in Hindi. Gupta (forthcoming) notes that *Panchajanya*’s cover depicted a man wearing a traditional Arab headdress, the *kaffiyeh*, sporting a beard in the shape of a heart, and donning sinister sunglasses in which red hearts were reflected. The magazine asked on the cover, *pyar andha ya dhandha*, which translates in English to ask “is love blind or a trade?” The publication goes on to warn its readers against licentious Muslim men taking advantage of Hindu women’s vulnerabilities in the context of the (marginal) decline in India’s Hindus as a proportion of the population. The rhetoric of “Love Jihad” has triggered a series of campaigns documented by two investigative news websites, *Cobrapost* and *Gulail.com* and reported by Jaffrelot³⁹ (2019: 58–9) in which RSS activists and BJP politicians claim to have rescued Hindu women from the clutches of Muslim men to protect not only their individual honor but also India’s national prestige.⁴⁰

The amendments to citizenship and the ensuing violence in Delhi

Delivering on an election promise to amend citizenship laws that would make it more difficult for Muslims to obtain citizenship, the Modi government tabled the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2020. Under the provisions of the Act, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, Sikhs and Zoroastrians from their Muslim-majority neighbors Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh would now find their applications for citizenship fast-tracked. By explicitly omitting Muslims from its purview, the CAA introduced a religious filter that struck at the heart of the secular principles enshrined in the Constitution. Home Minister Amit Shah promised parliament as well as audiences during political rallies and press conferences that the Amendment will be followed by the enumeration of a controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC). Indians will now have to prove their citizenship by providing certain documents, so they could be enlisted in the NRC: failure to do so could result in **detention** as “illegal immigrant” and possibly deportation. It is here that the CAA kicks in. India’s 200 million Muslims (the second largest Muslim community in the world), not covered under the ambit of the CAA, could find themselves disenfranchised and stateless if they are not able to prove their citizenship. While several state

governments protested against the imposition of the draconian law without broader public consultation, at least one poll in December 2019 found many Indians were sympathetic to it.⁴¹ Yet, recognizing the threat posed by the CAA to the basic structure of the Indian constitution, millions of people across class, caste, religious and gender divides took to the streets in protest.

To suppress the protests, BJP politicians began talking of taking the law into their own hands. On a Sunday afternoon that coincided with US President Donald Trump's visit to the country, Kapil Mishra, a politician affiliated with the BJP in Delhi, issued an ultimatum to the city police. He and his supporters wanted them to clear out a group of protestors who were preparing to block a portion of a major road. "We'll be quiet till Trump is in town," Mishra thundered. "After that, we're going to take matters into our own hands, so do ensure that the protestors are cleared out before Trump leaves." Mishra's supporters turned out to be even more enthusiastic about clearing out the protestors. Not only did they assault the protestors who had assembled down the road, they also began attacking nearby neighborhoods considered sympathetic to the protests. A religious angle now entered into the political conflict. Mishra and his supporters were mostly Hindu. The protestors and the neighborhoods they attacked mostly Muslim. The violence immediately took on a communal turn. Armed with sticks, guns and petrol bombs, mostly Hindu mobs attacked Muslim homes, shops and cars across north-east Delhi, less than 10 kilometers from where Prime Minister Modi was hosting President Trump. BJP lawmakers led rallies in support of Mishra and his activists. At these rallies, they bayed for the blood of the protestors and chanted incendiary slogans that called for the "traitors" to be shot to death.⁴² At least 50 people were killed in violence in Delhi in February, several hundreds injured and many thousands displaced.

By March 2020, the COVID-19 crisis exploded in India. Modi announced the world's largest lockdown with four hours notice. The worst hit⁴³ were the country's estimated 140 million migrant workers, many of who lost their jobs and were evicted. Several million of them began journeying back to the villages they call home, often on foot since public transport was suspended. India's opposition parties demonstrated their utter ineptitude by failing to mobilize to ensure dignity and justice for the millions of migrant laborers. The stringent lockdown provided convenient cover⁴⁴ for the BJP to muzzle the growing dissent against the CAA. As protestors wound up their campaigns in keeping with social distancing regulations, police⁴⁵ in Delhi erased protest graffiti, presumably to remove any trace of the protests. Dissidents were rounded up and imprisoned under draconian colonial-era laws. The respected scholar-activist Anand Teltumbde being one case in point.⁴⁶ Student-protestor Safoora Zargar is another.⁴⁷ Although India's thriving civil society protested vociferously, it was effectively curtailed to online forums.

Almost a year later, in March 2021, the Kumbha Mela, one of the world's largest devotional congregations commenced in the northern town of Hardwar. Despite worries voiced by the Prime Minister's own party colleagues, the congregation was allowed to progress unhindered for fear of annoying Hindu saints affiliated with *akharas*, monastic orders that dot the countryside across northern and western India. For over six weeks, millions of devotees congregated on the banks of the River Ganga without any face coverings and scant regard to social distancing. Indeed, the dates for the congregation was brought forward (it had initially been planned for 2022) at the behest of the saints despite the raging pandemic on account of opaque astrological formulations considered auspicious according to the Hindu calendar. The result was a surge in COVID cases in the country.

A temple to Ram

In November 2019, barely six months after re-election, the BJP's ethno-nationalist agenda received a major fillip when India's Supreme Court proclaimed in their favor while announcing a verdict on the 150-year-old dispute in the northern town of Ayodhya. The dispute was over a tract of land claimed as the birth-place of Rama, a hero and deity to many Hindus. A mosque had been built on that land by a Mughal general back in 1528: Hindu mobs exhorted by BJP leaders had pulled the mosque down in 1992. The Hindus claimed the tract of land as theirs and proposed to build a grand temple to honor Rama, while the Muslims claimed it as theirs, so they could rebuild the demolished mosque. By ruling in favor of the Hindus, the Court effectively legalized mob vandalism against the mosque, while handing over a *carte blanche* to the Hindus. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court responsible for the verdict was subsequently rewarded by being nominated as a BJP nominee to India's upper house of Parliament.

On August 5, 2020- exactly one year after the Indian government repudiated the autonomous status of the State of Jammu and Kashmir- the Prime Minister personally consecrated the Ram temple in Ayodhya. In a spectacular ceremony televised across the world, he performed the *bhumi poojan*, a ritual to worship the land on which the temple was planned to be constructed, led by Hindu priests and accompanied by other legislators, including the Chief Minister of the Uttar Pradesh, the State in which Ayodhya is located. The sight of the Head of Government of a secular democracy performing foundational rituals at a religious site that had been the bone of contention between the country's principal religious communities exemplified the distance India has traveled away from being a liberal democracy. From here on, India's democracy - nominally secular not because it enforced a strict separation between religion and state but

because it maintained equidistance between the state and the country's numerous faiths- was firmly distancing itself from its liberal pluralistic roots toward a more explicitly ethnic orientation.⁴⁸

Political-economic exclusion of Muslims

The third element of India's emerging ethnocracy has deeper roots: the political and economic exclusion of Muslims. As far back as 2006, the Sachar Commission appointed by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, noted important disparities between Hindus and Muslims.⁴⁹ Worker participation rates among Muslims lagged that of Hindus by almost 10% points⁵⁰), but outstripped them by nearly 10% points in informal manufacturing,⁵¹ 8% points in petty trade⁵² and 15% points as precarious self-employed workers.⁵³ Literacy rates for Muslims lags that for Hindus, including the historically oppressed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.⁵⁴ Fewer proportion of Muslims completed primary school⁵⁵ or middle school⁵⁶ than any other social group. Enrolment rates for Muslim children (6–14 years) was almost 10% points lower than for the national average.⁵⁷ The mean years of schooling for Muslim children (7–16 years old) was lower than for every other social group, including the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.⁵⁸

Muslim under-representation in military, bureaucratic and political positions has remained a long-standing trend. Jaffrelot⁵⁹ details the abysmally low levels of Muslim presence in the armed forces and in the public sector, which continues to provide employment to most Indians. Their presence in the higher echelons of these institutions was even lower. Adeney and Swenden⁶⁰ document the *worsening* representation of Muslims in legislatures (page 16), judiciary (page 19) and administrative positions (page 18). Muslim representation in India's cabinets, the foremost decision-making body in India, have declined.⁶¹

From a historical perspective, the responsibility for much of the political and economic exclusion must be placed on the Congress and other parties that have ruled India since independence. Indeed, the Sachar Commission noted that the situation of Muslims in Left-ruled West Bengal was worse than that of Muslims in Gujarat, despite the decade-long reign of the BJP in the latter State. Nevertheless, these parties at least paid lip-service to such narratives as “secularism” and “social justice” that signaled a commitment to include all sections of India's population within the political community. In his first term, Modi did promise to usher “development for all” (via the slogan *sabka saath sabka vikas*) but allowed Hindutva to emerge as the defining characteristic of his government, a trend that, as we have seen, has been consolidated after the BJP's re-election in 2019.

India: Contested dynamics of an emerging ethnocracy

An ethnocracy has taken root in India. As this essay demonstrates, the RSS, the ideological well-spring of the BJP, believes that Hindu culture is the “life-breath” of India (RSS, 2012). It has neither repudiated nor distanced itself from statements of previous leaders who regarded Muslims and Christians as culturally alien since they adhere to a faith with origins outside the territory that makes up India. Since the onset of BJP rule, conflict between Hindus and Muslims has intensified, illustrated by the incidents of lynching since 2015, the introduction of the CAA in 2019 and the 2020 rioting in Delhi. Stripping Jammu and Kashmir of both statehood and constitutionally guaranteed autonomy has signaled the assertion of Hindu-majority India over its only Muslim-majority State. The construction under official auspices of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya at the same site where Hindu mobs demolished a mosque in 1992 exemplifies the territorial conquest and occupation by the dominant Hindu ethnos over the Muslim minority. A rigid ethnonationalism, rooted in Hindutva, is unmistakable. Such ethnonationalism builds on, and intensifies, the economic deprivation and political exclusion faced by Muslims relative to other religious groups.

India’s ethnocracy is unlikely to be accompanied by a formal suspension of democracy. Modi does not tire of proclaiming India’s democratic lineage, unlike interwar European demagogues who pointedly rejected democracy. Indeed, the Prime Minister has gone on to extol India as the mother of all democracies. It is unlikely that his utterances are strategically oriented toward western audiences that might be worried about a democratic recession in India. Rather, the forums at which he has repeated claims of democracy being a quintessentially Indian ethos—election rallies, the houses of parliament—suggest an internal rather than an international audience for such narratives. The BJP has respected the mandate of the provincial elections they have lost since their spectacular re-election to power. Modi has declared himself at the service of his people rather than proclaiming himself as the equivalent of a *Fuhrer* or *Duce*. He remains a committed cadre of the RSS and is accountable to its Hindutva agenda. Modi’s BJP-led government is subjected checks and balances by its ideological parent. Indeed, such checks and balances are likely to prevent even as charismatic a leader as Modi from assuming absolute power.⁶²

Resisting ethnocracy

The making of India’s ethnocracy is by no means uncontested. Indeed, in line with the broader literature on resistance to ongoing processes of autocratisation,⁶³ it is reasonable to suggest that many actors attempt to resist the ethnocratic turn. Sometimes they fail, but sometimes they may stop and

even reverse it. Nonetheless, they perform an active role during the making of an ethnocracy and should be part of any explanation of this process. After all, power and resistance are entwined, so it would be erroneous to neglect one side of the equation by focusing only on the other. In fact, the outcome of the making of an ethnocracy is defined by the strategic interaction between drivers and opponents within a specific context marked by the structural, institutional and political pre-conditions that enable as well as constrain both sets of actors.

Resisting ethnocracy is distinct from preventing ethnocracy. In this regard, it is a field of enquiry that links with the emerging literature on democratic resilience⁶⁴ but is fundamentally distinct from it. Democratic resilience refers to the causes and structural preconditions that prevent the emergence of ethnocracies, whereas resistance refers to opposing the ethnocratic process once it is underway. Resistance, in this context, refers to an activity or combination of activities, taken by a dynamic set of actors who may or may not be related to one another and who, irrespective of (often disparate) motivations try to slow down, stop, or revert to the ethnocratic process. In this section, I consider three such types of resistance.

Institutional resistance

Institutional resistance refers to actions by individuals populating state institutions at national and sub-national levels: they are often responsible for implementing inter-institutional accountability on executive power. Due to their roles within state institutions, they have the power and the competencies to ensure compliance with constitutional rules and democratic norms, thereby potentially resisting the ethnocratic turn. The recent tug of war⁶⁵ between the judiciary and the government over the question of judicial appointments suggests that there may yet be institutional checks to the government's aggrandizing tendencies. The tug of war appeared to have been sparked by the appointment of Justice DY Chandrachud as the Chief Justice of India (CJI): the government proposed the establishment of a National Judicial Appointments Commission that would give it a greater say in the appointment of judges. But this was struck down by the judiciary, suggesting that the judiciary may yet enjoy a degree of autonomy from the government.

That said, such a degree of autonomy is little guarantee against India's descent into an ethnocracy. Institutions such as the bureaucracy and the judiciary may well mount effective checks against the government. However, they may be less effective in checking the tide in favor of mainstreaming ethnocratic ideas. After all, the present CJI was one of the five judges who ruled in favor of the Ram Temple when the matter was deliberated in the Supreme Court. His stance vis-à-vis the CAA remains to be seen: the over 200 petitions challenging the discriminatory law have yet to be heard in the Supreme Court due to the CJI's heavy caseload. The Supreme Court's

judgment on the CAA will be a crucial test of institutional resistance against India's ethnocentric turn.

Political resistance

If institutional resistance to India's ethnocentric turn appears rather thin, the political resistance offers more grounds for hope. Political resistance refers to resistance against the ethnocentric turn by political leaders and parties from within and outside state institutions. Opposition parties can play this role through numerous tactics and strategies, especially in the context of electoral competition. Alternatively, political resistance can come from within incumbent parties and/or their allies. Ruling parties could split, or party allies could defect, exemplifying resistance from within.

The BJP has faced reverses in several State-level elections since 2014, including such politically crucial States as Bihar (2015), West Bengal (2016 and 2021), Kerala (2016 and 2021), Tamil Nadu (2016 and 2021), Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh (2018), Karnataka (2018 and 2023), and Punjab (2017 and 2022). In several of these elections, the BJP ran an explicitly communal campaign designed to stir religious passions and targeting opposition parties for their real or perceived favorable attitudes toward Muslims. Prime Minister Modi himself was a star campaigner during these elections, supporting his party's efforts at shoring up Hindu sentiments. However, opposition parties such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Trinamul Congress, Congress (I), Communist Party of India (M) and Aam Admi Party were able to counter the BJP's attempts at religious polarization through crafting alternative social coalitions of their own.

Since its reelection to power in 2019, the BJP has also faced defection from party allies. The Punjab-based Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) broke ranks with the party over the contentious farm laws introduced in September 2021. Earlier in 2019, the Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena had severed ties with the party and formed the government in the State with the support of other opposition parties. However, rebels split the party and aligned their faction with the BJP, clawing back power in the State, but in the process exposed the limits of the BJP's dominance. Most recently, the Bihar-based Janata Dal (United), severed ties with the BJP to join other opposition parties in the State and has successfully formed the government in that State.

Social resistance

Adding weight to the political resistance faced by the BJP is the social resistance to its ethnocentric project. Social resistance refers to organized challenges mounted from the grassroots by civil society organizations, social movements, trade unions and other actors from social, economic and cultural spaces.

While social resistance to the BJP's efforts at making India an ethnocracy have been manifold, two are of specific relevance.

One example of social resistance can be seen from popular response to the Citizenship Amendment Act. Against its discriminatory provisions, India erupted in protests not seen in over four decades. Hundreds of thousands of protestors,⁶⁶ cutting across religious, ethnic and class cleavages, spilled out on the streets protesting the amendment for violating India's secular constitution. Identity politics and claims of inclusive citizenship intersected to produce democracy as a social and associational practice. Protestors condemned the religious filter introduced by the Act, which they correctly believe is targeted against Muslims. Civil society activists,⁶⁷ such as the former civil servant Harsh Mander, called for civil disobedience against the act. Opposition parties organized huge rallies against the act in the States they govern. But it is the protests led by students that took the country by storm. Student protests spread across at least 33 university campuses. It was only the onset of the COVID pandemic that compelled activists to back down. But, as COVID restrictions are lifted, student protests appear likely to resume.

A second example of social resistance is offered by the farmers' protests against three legislations that collectively aimed at liberalizing agriculture⁶⁸ in India from state-guaranteed protections introduced in September 2020. In response, over 30 farmers unions mobilized their members to sit-in peacefully at protest sites on Delhi's borders since the end of November. They were met with tear gas shells and water cannons. Although a 24-hour nationwide general strike,⁶⁹ involving 250 million workers in support of the farmers passed without incidence, the government was obviously rattled. Fearing a broader popular upsurge,⁷⁰ it looked for ways to discredit the protestors, a large number of whom were of the Sikh community in Punjab. Pro-government blogs⁷¹ started floating conspiracy theories linking the farmers' protests with Pakistani machinations to support an independent Khalistan, invoking memories of the bitter Hindu-Sikh conflict that rent Punjab asunder during the 1980s. Matters came to a head on Republic Day (January 2021), when a small section of protestors clashed with the police and sought to occupy the iconic Red Fort. Ignoring the largely peaceful protests, India's pliant media lost no time in condemning the entire swathe of protestors, accusing them of conspiring to defame India and to damage the country's reputation. Against their machinations, farmers from across northern and northwestern India cut across religious divides, to congregate at Delhi, thus reinvigorating their protests. Eventually, Prime Minister Modi backed down in December 2022 and repealed the three legislations.

Conclusion

On September 27, 2024, the RSS will begin observing its centenary celebrations. It is now impossible to predict whether the BJP will retain power (the

next General Elections are due in April-May 2024) or indeed whether Modi will remain Prime Minister. The ethnocracy being fashioned in the country is likely to gain deeper roots if the present trajectory continues. However, it is also facing political and social resistance, which should not be neglected. The Hindu ethnocracy being established by the BJP will be a centenary gift the RSS will truly cherish. Supporters of democracy can only hope that the social and political resistance against the BJP's ongoing ethnocratic project is strengthened by institutional actors.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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