

The Triumph of the Indian Right:

Reasons and Ramifications



By Kalyani Shankar




ASIA PROGRAM

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20004-3027

www.wilsoncenter.org/asia

Cover Image: David Talukdar / Shutterstock.com

Copyright 2019 All Rights Reserved



The Triumph of the Indian Right:

Reasons and Ramifications

By Kalyani Shankar



Preface

In 2019, Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) achieved an overwhelming victory in India's national election. It marked the second such election in a row that resulted in such a resounding triumph for the BJP, a Hindu nationalist party.

While the BJP's win may not have been a surprise—it had been favored by many to win, particularly with the opposition Congress Party having struggled to mount a strong campaign—the large margin of victory was quite striking. In the months leading up to the election, the BJP had looked vulnerable, thanks in great part to several losses in state elections and to soaring unemployment rates. And yet the BJP still managed to pull off a second consecutive dramatic electoral win.

How did the BJP get to this point, where it has become the undisputed juggernaut of Indian national politics? This new report, prepared by former Wilson Center public policy fellow Kalyani Shankar, a veteran journalist and political analyst, breaks down the factors that helped account for the BJP's two electoral triumphs. More broadly, the report demonstrates how the party has evolved over the years, starting from its earliest days, and how it has set itself apart from its rivals. The report also discusses the Indian political right in the context of a current global trend that has seen the rise and triumph of conservative and nationalist political parties and leaders in many different parts of the world.

Shankar's report is largely based on interviews she conducted with senior members of the BJP and other political parties, along with academics and other thought leaders in India and beyond. The Wilson Center's Asia Program is delighted to publish this new and timely study of the current political zeitgeist in India—an increasingly critical player on the world stage and a key partner of the United States.

Michael Kugelman
Deputy Director, Asia Program
Senior Associate for South Asia
Woodrow Wilson Center

September 2019

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Global Context	2
India's Shift to the Right	2
The Decline of Congress and the Left Parties	5
Socialist Stream and Identity Politics	8
The BJS and the BJP	9
Modi's Emergence as Prime Minister	12
Growth of the BJP	13
Right Wing Impact on Indian Economic Scene	15
Right Wing Impact on Indian Foreign Policy	17
The 2019 Elections and Modi's Win	23
Conclusion	24
Endnotes	28
About the Author	31

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes whether India is moving toward right-wing politics, emulating the European countries, the United States and elsewhere; addresses the reasons for the rise of Hindu nationalism in India; considers whether the electoral victories of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will be sustained; and speculates on the future of right-wing expansion in India. It also assesses the political, economic, and diplomatic impacts of India's right-wing politics at national, regional, and global levels.

My hypothesis is that presently, India is moving toward exclusionary politics. The ruling BJP represents majoritarian and chauvinistic cultural nationalism. Its ultimate aim is to create a Hindu Rashtra (nation). Hindu religious identity is to be recreated as the basis of national identity, which excludes Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities in a multilingual and multireligious society.

With right or right-of-center governments in power in the world's major democracies—India, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and the United States—there has been an apprehension that democracy is bringing into power those who favor exclusionary rather than inclusionary politics. *The Harvard Political Review* notes: "While coverage of right-populist movements has mainly focused on Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump, the far right has been strengthening throughout the West."¹

The reasons for this trend are still being probed, and several explanations have been proposed: the rejection of the existing system, the articulation of silent fears and aspirations, the inability on the part of the left to come up with a credible alternative narrative, and so on. Professor Ralph Buultjens, former Nehru professor at Cambridge University, points out: "In most areas of modern life—social interaction[s], science, education, economics, travel, and transportation etc.—secularism has made great gains. Yet, in an extraordinary way, in politics and civic discourse, religion has become a growing input. Political leaders, either out of opportunism or belief, have seized on this. One of the big questions of our time is why, in today's world, this has happened and happened relatively suddenly."²

Many right-wing governments are in power in Europe. A Bloomberg analysis across 22 European countries reveals that even back in 2017, support for populist radical-right parties was higher than it had been at any other time over the past 30 years.³ Today, Europe, which was once dominated by the Social Democrats after World War II, is slowly moving toward the right. The continued rule of Russia's Vladimir Putin, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, and German

Chancellor Angela Merkel show a similar trend. The conservatives have been ruling in the United Kingdom since 2010. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt won both Parliamentary and Presidential elections in 2011-12 though it was ousted in a coup. To be sure, there have been some exceptions to this trend. Elections in France and the Netherlands in 2017 checked the momentum of right-wing populist parties in Europe.

Several reasons are cited for the rightward movement in the UK. Former Bank of England Director Andrew Lakerman identifies the impact of the 2008 global recession, a growing sense of nationalism, populism, a lack of jobs, economic inequality, and the rejection of the establishment. The recession was a particularly big shock. "Few people saw it coming. In the Bank of England, others and I underestimated the impact of recession or how long it will last and how it affected the people who were running the country much less than those who lost their jobs after 2008. It was thought it would recover in five years but it is 10 years and it has lasted long because it was much deeper," says Lakerman.⁴

GLOBAL CONTEXT

How does one explain this growing resurgence of the populist right? Many experts feel that the right-wing movement is spreading because of worldwide recession, refugee crises, nationalism, and populism; the latter two issues represent new ascendant political forces. Immigration, racism, and other kinds of discrimination have also contributed, along with economic factors like unemployment. All these trigger nationalism and the rightward movement.

Here, it's worth stepping back and weighing in on some definitional considerations. What is "left wing" and "right wing?" One interesting historical precedent is that in the years leading up to the French Revolution, the terms left and right referred to the seating arrangements in the French National Assembly. The supporters of the king sat on his right side, and the opponents on his left.

In more modern times, the right tends to believe in capitalism, minimum government, a free-market, a job-oriented economy, liberalization, and foreign investments. It is also majoritarian in outlook, and against migrants. The left is liberal in outlook, and believes in government intervention in the economy and in welfare policies.

INDIA'S SHIFT TO THE RIGHT

India's BJP has three core goals. The first is building the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the birthplace of the mythical Lord Ram. The BJP leader

L.K. Advani undertook the famous Rath Yatra (Chariot pilgrimage) from Somnath Temple in Gujarat to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh in September 1990. The Ram temple and Babri Mosque were adjacent to each other. The BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) constituents assembled in Ayodhya for prayers, and suddenly some of them demolished the mosque. The destruction of the mosque resulted in several months of rioting involving Hindus and Muslims. The Supreme Court is still deciding about who owns the land where the mosque and the temple are located.

The second is formulating a Uniform Civil Code for all. After independence, the Jawaharlal Nehru government codified the Hindu personal law, a process initiated by the British. But Muslims still follow their personal laws. The BJP wants a uniform civil law for all Indians and wants to do away with the Muslim personal law.

Thirdly, the BJP wants to end the special autonomous status of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir by abrogating Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. And on this count, the BJP has acted boldly. In August 2019, it announced that article 370 will be repealed; that Jammu and Kashmir will lose its special autonomous status and statehood; and that it will become an Indian union territory.

Some senior BJP leaders, including Vinay Sahasrabuddhe and Prabhat Jha, do not agree with the phrase “right wing” to describe their party. Sahasrabuddhe argues that the rejection of the left is undoubtedly happening in India because the ideology of the left has become obsolete. It has lost relevance and cannot resonate with popular aspirations and therefore people are rejecting it time and again. “But that does not mean the world is moving towards right,” he insists.⁵

Swapan Dasgupta, a political commentator and BJP member in India’s upper house of parliament, notes that, “For a start, it is important to remember that the BJP has consciously shunned the ‘right’ label, preferring to be viewed in terms of its nationalist credentials. As a self-professed ‘India First’ Party, the BJP has traditionally focused its attacks on the ‘secular’ underpinnings of the Nehruvian consensus.”⁶ And yet the BJP has a clear focus on the right wing. The BJP has two primary strands: the cultural right and the economic right. The cultural right concentrates on issues of nationhood and the identity of the country. The economic right focuses on free market issues. The first strand is far more powerful.

Senior Congress Party leader and three-time New Delhi chief minister Sheila Dixit observes that the move to the right is part of a recurring cycle. She points out that “history does not remain static all the time.

Thought process, political thinking etc. - all these never remain static. It changes.”⁷

Is the ideological move to the right in India a reflection of a global trend or is the shift part of the rhythm of politics in India? Dasgupta believes that this is not part of a global phenomenon, as there is no doubt that the BJP has expanded and is continuing to do so. The right has always been present in Indian politics, but it has gradually become pan-national, and more so since 2014 when the BJP came to power on its own strength—not once but twice since 2014—and has been able to rule with its own friendly coalition. The BJP has now overtaken Congress, the 132-year grand old party that has ruled India for a great majority of the years since independence—and that is on the other end of the ideological spectrum from the BJP. The BJP’s 2019 election triumph underscores the party’s new dominance.

The BJP is by and large a party that claims to represent Hindu interests. It believes that the culture of India is basically Hindu, and that it should reflect the values of society and how the government functions. “That is a loose construct, as loose as the Christian Democrats saying ‘we are not purely theocratic or Islamic party and we believe in Christian values and not Christian religion.’ Some of it is religion, but most of it is culture. Culture and religion are so intertwined that it is difficult to separate the two.”⁸

The U.S.-based PEW Research Forum has estimated that by 2050, India will have the largest Muslim population in the world. “India also is expected to have 311 million Muslims in 2050 (11% of the global total), making it the country with the largest population of Muslims in the world. Currently, Indonesia has the world’s largest number of Muslims.”⁹ It is these kinds of apprehensions that prompt hawks in the BJP to create fear in the minds of Hindus, and to encourage polarization between Hindus and Muslims—which invariably results in incidents of lynching and mob violence. The BJP propagates the idea that the majority (Hindus) has been discriminated against, and it has accused the Congress Party of indulging in Muslim appeasement. It talks of “justice for all and appeasement for none.” It has used this fear of majority discrimination in its election campaigns to polarize the two communities.

The BJP has joined the International Democratic Union (IDU), a group of center-right parties from across the democratic world. In February 2016, BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav tweeted, “BJP formally joined IDU, a group of political parties from the democratic world, as a full member at its EC (Executive Council) meeting in Colombo.”¹⁰

THE DECLINE OF CONGRESS AND THE LEFT PARTIES

One of the reasons for the BJP's rise is the gradual slide of Congress and the left-wing parties in India. Indeed, the BJP has exploited the weaknesses of the other parties and consolidated various caste groups in a new social coalition, promising development and economic growth. This has led to the steady consolidation of the right wing in India.

The Communist parties of China, India, Europe, Cuba, and Vietnam were all inspired by the Soviet revolution led by Lenin. After India's independence in 1947, the Communist Party of India (CPI) was the main opposition party. The Congress Party ruled between 1951 and 1977 without interruption. The erstwhile Madras presidency saw the presence of Communist legislators and also later in the linguistically carved out Andhra Pradesh. During this time, the right and the left were mainly divided between the Congress and the CPI.

Comrade EMS Namboodiripad headed the first Communist Party government in April 1957 in Kerala, a southern state. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru dismissed this government in 1959. The CPI-Marxist (CPI-M) was formed after the CPI split in 1964. But the emergence of regional parties since the 1970s changed the bipolar equations of the two camps.

The left parties saw a golden period during the 1990s and early 2000s when they ruled in three states: West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura. They also had some presence in states like Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. They supported the National Front government led by V.P. Singh in 1989. They played kingmaker roles for the two United Front governments during 1996-98, when the left joined a 13-party coalition, and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) between 2004 and 2008. The left parties withdrew their support to the Manmohan Singh government on the issue of the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal in 2008.

The prime decline of the left began with the 2009 elections, when it won 24 seats—far fewer than half of its tally in the previous polls, and the number fell further in 2014 to just 12 seats. The decimation of the left, and particularly of the CPI-M, was almost complete in 2019. Today, the party is in a coma. Registering its worst ever poll performance in over six decades, the Left Front managed just five seats across the country in the 2019 polls.

Two broad groups have traditionally occupied the non-left space. One was the classical liberal who believed in free markets and in minimal

government interference in the economy and social and cultural matters. The other was a conservative nationalist group whose economic ideology was protectionist and majoritarian. This is largely the Hindu right. The rise of the BJP has brought with it the first right-wing party at the national level. Barring a few exceptions, most other parties such as the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, and Biju Janata Dal, can be clubbed as centrist parties.

Congress, on the other hand, has remained an umbrella party consisting of all shades of opinions including that of the left-liberal and conservative right, as well as centrists. It has seen ups and downs over the past 70 years. Though the Congress started as a left-of-center party, it moved leftward in the 1960s and 1970s, dominating at the national, provincial, and local levels.

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, chose the socialist path based on the Soviet model. He presided over an omnibus party, which provided space for leftists, communists, centrists, radicals, and also right-wing supporters. Though the socialist model succeeded in kick-starting the economy in India, it failed to achieve its goals.

When Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi took over, she leaned toward the left and pursued a command economy. She also unleashed the nationalisation of banks, insurance companies, and the coal, oil, and gas sectors. Additionally, she abolished privy purses meant for the erstwhile rulers of the princely states in 1971. The Privy Purse was a payment to the royal families of the erstwhile Maharajas, as part of their agreement to merge their states with India after independence.

Her peak came when she won a war against Pakistan and played a key role in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. She imposed a state of emergency in 1975, and after elections were held in 1977, she lost power to opposition forces. She came back with a big majority in the 1980 elections. The government's attitude soon went from hostility to a supportive role for business, and she realigned herself politically with the organized private sector. Congress survived because it moved back to a right-of-center position.

Indira's son Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded her after her assassination in 1984, steered the economy toward the right of center at the end of the decade. He conceived of India as a global power and talked of its important role in the 21st century. He pushed for liberalization in the first three years of his term, and he tried to reform the public sector. However, after the Bofors gun deal scandal broke out in 1987, he practically took his hands off the economic lever. The Rajiv Gandhi government was accused

of accepting a kickback in the Bofors gun deal in 1987. The scandal was about a \$1.4 billion howitzer deal, between the Swedish arms manufacturer Bofors and the Indian government, signed in 1986. It was alleged that the company paid nearly \$9 million to politicians and Congress leaders and bureaucrats. Rajiv Gandhi lost power in 1989 due to the Bofors scandal.

On the social and religious side, the Congress party was accused of adopting appeasement politics by tilting towards Muslims. The BJP took advantage of this and played up the fears of the Hindus that they were being marginalized.

The V.P. Singh government, which succeeded the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1989, was supported by the left and the right to keep out the Congress. However, it did not last long. The next government, which took office in 1990, was also short-lived. Huge external borrowing, coupled with the withdrawal of support to the government by the Congress Party, led to a political and economic crisis.

In 1991, after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, a Congress government led by P.V. Narasimha Rao was elected in June. Though heading a minority government, Rao was bold enough to dismantle the command economy and make a 360-degree turn toward a right-wing economy. And so a rightward swing started by Rajiv Gandhi became official during Rao's regime, which ran from 1991 to 1996. India, facing bare minimum foreign exchange reserves, had to borrow huge amounts of money from international agencies to address the financial crisis. Successive governments continued the reform process started by the Congress Party. This continuity has been an important factor in India's path of economic reform.

The mandate in the 1996 general election was against Congress. The BJP emerged as the single largest party and it formed the government, but it fell after 13 days because no other party supported it. The saffron party again emerged as the single largest party in the 1998 and 1999 elections. The 2004 elections were a battle between two coalitions: the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Congress-led UPA, with the latter scoring a victory. Yashwant Sinha, then the external affairs minister, notes: "In 2004 we lost for the simple reason that we became very cocky. We thought we were winning all the way. 'India shining' slogan was a cardinal mistake, and advancing the polls by six months was another cardinal mistake. The result was that we lost about 40 seats. The development slogan just did not help."¹¹

Congress President Sonia Gandhi declined to become the first UPA prime minister. Instead she nominated world-renowned economist Dr. Manmohan Singh. However, she ruled by proxy for the next 10 years.

Supported by the left, Singh ran a successful government and even returned to power for a second term in 2009, though the left withdrew its support in 2008 on the issue of the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal. Two parallel streams ran through his regime. One was Singh's continuation of further liberalization, and the other was Sonia Gandhi's left-leaning welfare policy. However, the gains were lost midway as the government suffered a policy paralysis after 2010. Several scandals, including allegations of corruption in the allocation of 2G spectrum revealed by the comptroller and auditor general of India, as well as coal allocation irregularities, made a weak Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hesitant to make hard policy decisions.

It was at this point in time that three-time Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi came on to the scene. He promised change and held out hope to the electorate. In the 2014 elections, the Congress Party faced its worst-ever defeat, winning just 44 of the parliamentary 543 seats. The Congress slide continued in subsequent state polls, though it became a ruling coalition partner in some states. In Bihar, Congress became a part of the successful "Grand Alliance" in 2015, but afterward Chief Minister Nitish Kumar changed sides and returned to the BJP-led NDA. The party won Punjab and Puducherry states on its own strength. In Karnataka, it became a ruling coalition partner with the junior ally Janata Dal-Secular in 2018. Congress's fortunes started looking up again after snatching power from the BJP in the Hindi heartland—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh—in December 2018. This checked the rightward movement for the time being. However, the BJP came back with a bang in the 2019 polls, earning 303 seats, while the Congress bagged just 52.

Congress Party treasurer Ahmed Patel admits that the party needs to be rebuilt. "If we have to compete with the BJP, we must have office bearers who can spend at least 18 to 20 days in a month in that particular state. The other parties have a separate committed cadre. We have some problem about this. But the Congress president is working out all these things."¹²

SOCIALIST STREAM AND IDENTITY POLITICS

At another level, apart from the Congress, the BJP and the Left, there has also been a socialist stream running through the Indian political spectrum since the late 1970s. Socialist leader Jaya Prakash Narayan launched the Janata Party after Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency (between 1975 and 1977). This would in time pave the way for the emergence of some of the present-day leaders heading splinter parties like Lalu Prasad Yadav (Rashtriya Janata Dal), Mulayam Singh Yadav (Samajwadi Party), Deve Gowda (Janata Dal -Secular), Nitish Kumar (Janata Dal-United), Ajit Singh

(Rashtriya Lok Dal), Om Prakash Chautala (National Lok Dal), and Naveen Patnaik (Biju Janata Dal). In southern India, too, there was a Dravidian movement—around since the 1940s—which produced Dravidian parties like the Dravida Kazhagam, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. (AIADMK). The Dravidian movement was started in the south in the 1940s as a revolt against the Brahmin dominance in the four Dravidian states of South India. Led by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, the movement was based on three ideologies—the revitalization of Dravidian languages that include Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada; social reforms through the abolition of the caste system; and the promoting of equality for women within society. The Dravidian parties have dug in their heels since 1967, when the DMK came to power and trounced the Congress. The DMK and the AIADMK have alternately been ruling the southern state of Tamil Nadu since 1967.

The issue of identity politics has also been a major concern. The rise of lower castes, religious identities, linguistic groups, the emergence of Backward Classes, the identity politics of the BJP, insurgency and autonomy movements, and the emergence of regional parties have all taken center stage. Caste identities have become an important determinant of Indian politics, while religious identity has become a major source of confrontation. The Jana Sangh and later the BJP played identity politics by taking a Hindu nationalistic line. The rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party, founded by the late Kanshiram in 1984, was a significant development. It was founded to represent Bahujans, referring to people from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes as well as religious minorities. Gender has become an identity issue as well, with even the Supreme Court recognizing the urgency of gender equality. Women, who are 50 percent of India's 1.25 billion-strong population, have also begun to assert themselves.

THE BJS AND THE BJP

As for the Hindu religious identity, the RSS floated its political front Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) in 1951, which won three seats and went on to bag 35 in 1967. After Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in 1948, the RSS was banned for its alleged involvement, and then Indira Gandhi banned it a second time in 1975, during the state of emergency. The BJS joined forces with Bharatiya Lok Dal, the Congress (Organization) and the Socialist Party to launch the Janata Party, which formed the first non-Congress central government in 1977 headed by Morarji Desai. In 1980, due to a dispute over dual membership (RSS and Jana Sangh), the BJS quit the Janata Party and the BJP was launched as the political wing of the RSS. Vajpayee led the BJP between 1980 and 1984. The party lost the plot during that period after it got just two seats in the 1984 elections.

But the BJP began to grow soon thereafter, when L.K. Advani took over the reins. The BJP's growth is indeed notable, as it grew from a mere two seats in the Lok Sabha (lower parliament) in 1984 to 85 in 1989 and then to 120 seats in 1991. In 1996, it went up to 161 and bagged 182 in 1998. It won the same number in 1999. In 2004, there was a slide as the party won 138 seats, and in 2009 it went down further to 116 seats. From 2004 to 2014 it was out of power, but in 2014 the Narendra Modi-led BJP got a majority of its own (282 seats) and formed the government. The BJP improved on its performance in 2019 by winning 303 seats.

Over the past four decades, slowly but surely the BJP has become a force to be reckoned with. Interestingly, by 1998, the party had made it clear that if allies came, it was willing to keep aside its core issues like Ram Temple, Article 370, and the Uniform Civil Code. Because of the liberal face of Vajpayee, the allies did indeed come. Vajpayee led a heterogeneous coalition with 24 partners in 1998 and then from 1999 to 2004.

A unique feature of the BJP is that it is not an independent party, as it is the political front of the RSS. Founded in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar and consolidated by M.S. Golwalker, the RSS has been promoting Hindu interests for decades. The RSS currently runs about 70,000 Shakhas (local training camps) across the country. Most Pracharaks (volunteers who propagate the RSS philosophy) are college-educated and from high castes. Gradually the newly empowered Other Backward Classes has entered the Shakhas as well. The RSS has affiliates in 31 countries, named the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS). In fact, it was the HSS that organized, financed, and staffed the high-profile public event for Prime Minister Modi at Madison Square Garden in New York in 2014.

BJP leader Vinay Sahasrabudhe explains that Congress nationalism is territorial while BJP nationalism is cultural, while stressing common culture as a basis. "We believe that we are together not simply because territories are skewed together but because our culture is common, our ethos is common, the sharing of our emotions is common. Nation is an entity. In that sense our nationalism is more real nationalism and more factual nationalism."¹³

The RSS-led Sangh Parivar is determined to pursue its Hindutva agenda with full vigour. Modi has shown that this can be dovetailed with governance and can even attract alliance partners. He has experimented with a new kind of social engineering by co-opting the Other Backward Classes, Dalits, and other smaller sub-castes and giving them respectability by giving them representation in his cabinet. This addition of various castes and sub-castes as part of the BJP's social coalition has been quite successful, as proved by the 2019 poll results.

The RSS itself is at a crossroads, according to American academic and former State Department official Walter K. Andersen. Its dilemma is how political it should be. Anderson notes that “the RSS does make a point of referring to itself as apolitical, that they have goals and objectives that don’t depend on the current government. That said, it obviously wants the BJP to be in power because the affiliated organizations often have to deal with issues where the government has a big role to play.”¹⁴ The second dilemma is Hindu versus Hindutva. The RSS is against caste differences and wants to unite all Hindus, but that is diametrically opposed to the essence of much of what Hinduism is about, as it believes in caste hierarchy and the Chatur Varna dharma (four basic castes). The third challenge is the linkages to the BJP and how intimate that relationship should be. “I don’t think they have decided on that. Some feel they need to be more influential while others feel that would undermine their essence if they do that.”¹⁵

There is a perception among leftists, moderates, and liberals that there is religious tension under Modi’s rule. Incidents in the past five years like the lynchings of Muslims, the banning of beef, and cow vigilantism make them believe that the fundamentalists are getting emboldened under BJP rule.

Significantly, then-U.S. President Barack Obama, while on a state visit in January 2015 to participate in India’s Republic Day celebrations, spoke candidly about his perception of the plight of religious minorities in India. After his return to Washington, he observed that “Michelle (Obama) and I returned from India—an incredible, beautiful country, full of magnificent diversity—but a place where, in past years, religious faiths of all types have, on occasion, been targeted by other peoples of faith, simply due to their heritage and their beliefs—acts of intolerance that would have shocked Gandhiji, the person who helped to liberate that nation.”¹⁶

Dasgupta notes that the BJP’s support comes from a combination of things. There is one section of the BJP (basically Hindus), which is about 18 percent. These are their core voters. By drawing away some incremental votes from the Congress and the left, the BJP has moved in to fill the space vacated by these two parties. “Calling it the dominant party is probably exaggerated at the moment but certainly it has become the principal party. The Congress has become today a regional party plus.”¹⁷

According to the CPI-M leader Prakash Karat, the 1990s witnessed the rise of Hindutva forces. “The unabashed advocacy of majority communalism began to occupy center stage, which successfully challenged the dominant ruling-class consensus represented by the Congress.”¹⁸

MODI'S EMERGENCE AS PRIME MINISTER

It was in this context that Modi emerged as the Hindutva icon. The Indian president's press secretary Ashok Malik points out that there were many reasons for his victory in 2014. He represented an authoritarian leadership as well as the Hindu ideology. He represented economic hope and promised a non-corrupt government. Many believe that while not all corruption has vanished, at least in the upper echelons it has come down. "Has he fulfilled all his promises? He has fulfilled some and not fulfilled others, but that is for voters to judge."¹⁹

Never in the country's history did the Indian corporate class come together in support of a prime ministerial candidate as it did for Modi in 2014. It believed that the business-friendly Gujarat chief minister would help corporate interests. The Mint news outlet reported that "The Nielsen/Economic Times poll of 100 corporate leaders in September 2013 showed that 74 percent wanted Modi to be Prime Minister while just 7 percent believed Rahul Gandhi would be the best choice."²⁰ Also, money and other kinds of help came pouring in from the Non Resident Indian community, while even a fraction of such assistance was not available to his opponents.

The corporate support continued in the 2019 elections. An *Economic Times* survey of 130 CEOs from diverse sectors revealed that "a majority of them—60 percent of the CEOs and 73 percent of the readers polled—rate the Modi government's five years as good, while 36 percent and 13 percent respectively call it average."²¹ They felt that there was a need for continuity and Modi should get a second term. Milan Vaishnav, director and senior fellow with the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, claims that it is nearly impossible to gauge how much corporations were spending in 2019, but that "overall election spending this year will probably hit \$7-8 billion, which is up from an estimated \$5 billion in 2014."²²

Youth support was one of the major reasons for the BJP victory in both 2014 and 2019. According to official figures, of the 150 million first-time voters in the 18 to 23 age group, many voted for the BJP in 2014. Sixty-five percent of India's population is under 35 years old, and half of them are under 25 years of age. The youth demographic calling for change is not only aspirational but also ambitious and impatient. This was certainly the case in 2014. It was attracted by stability and the right-wing promise of economic growth. Some young people were also lured by communal and majoritarian considerations.

In 2019, high unemployment, the spread of Hindu nationalism, and hate crimes against Muslims were among the issues on the minds of newly

eligible voters, who number about 130 million. Though young people were disappointed about a lack of jobs, they still chose Modi because there was no alternative. The youth had influence in as many as 282 seats. Modi made national security the centerpiece of his electoral strategy, and he successfully shifted the narrative away from unemployment and rural distress.

The role of women in contemporary Indian politics is far more complex. Although they comprise nearly half of the country's population, women's representation in Parliament has been dismal. Political parties deny them tickets because of the perception that women don't get elected. And yet, women have made great strides as voters. Today, in most states, female turnout surpasses that of men. In 2019, the gap between female and male voter turnout narrowed further. In 2019, for the first time, women voter turnout equalled that of men. It also saw the highest number of 72 (14 percent) women in Parliament.

GROWTH OF THE BJP

As for the growth of the BJP, the first breakthrough came in 1990 when party leader L.K. Advani launched his famous Rath (chariot) Yatra from Somnath temple in Gujarat state to Ayodhya, the birthplace of the mythological Lord Ram in Uttar Pradesh state, which really took them up to the BJP-led NDA's rule that began in 1998. The Babri mosque in Ayodhya, adjacent to the Ram temple, was demolished on December 6, 1992 by a Hindu mob when the Sangh Parivar (RSS and its constituents) organized a gathering of Kar Sevaks (BJP/RSS workers). By this time, the BJP had made rapid gains and was concentrating on the consolidation of its newfound power. The party gave itself a liberal face so that it could be accepted as an alternative to the Congress, and Vajpayee became that face.

The next big step for the BJP's emergence came when Vajpayee formed a coalition government in 1998 with 24 partners, establishing that the BJP was not untouchable to other political parties. Vajpayee's government lasted 13 months, and in 1999 he secured a second term until 2004.

The third key phase for the BJP began in 2002, when Modi became the chief minister of Gujarat and emerged as the new icon of the Hindu right-wingers after the Godhara carnage. This train coach burning incident occurred on the morning of February 27, 2002. Fifty-nine people (Hindu Karsevaks) who were returning from Ayodhya died in a fire inside the Sabarmati Express coach near the Godhara railway station, 135 kilometres from Ahmedabad in Gujarat. According to official figures, ensuing riots resulted in the death of 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus, with 2,500 people injured. Modi was accused of initiating and condoning this violence.

As a Hindutva icon, Modi surpassed even L.K. Advani.

The Gujarat chief minister was denied a visa by several Western countries because of the Godhara carnage, though they invited him officially once he became prime minister. Starting in 2007, Modi changed his strategy and projected himself as a development-oriented chief minister, showcasing Gujarat as a business model for investors. He showed two faces—one as an economic modernizer, and the other as a representative of Hindu nationalism.

The Congress won a consecutive second term in 2009. The BJP lost out because of the clash between its strategy of focusing more on higher castes led by a jaded leadership and a modern political system. Ashok Malik notes that the generation of leaders that had earlier taken the BJP to power was a very fine generation, but by 2004 it had become old. “[A] new generation should have led the BJP in the 2009 polls. They missed out on that. If they had projected someone else other than Advani as prime ministerial candidate, probably they could have done better.”²³

Modi emerged as an alternative after the Manmohan Singh government got embroiled in a number of scandals. He successfully projected himself within the party and outside as a prime ministerial candidate. The BJP emerged as a leading party with a firm majority in parliament in 2014 after three decades of coalition experimentation. The BJP got 282 seats, 10 more than the required majority, on its own.

The magnitude of its success was evident from the fact that the party had peaked or very nearly peaked in north and western India, which contribute the largest chunk of parliamentary seats. The BJP bagged all the seats in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Goa, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, along with 71 of the 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh. In Bihar, the BJP and its allies got 31 of the 40 seats, in Chattisgarh 10 out of 11, in Jharkhand 12 out of 14, in Madhya Pradesh 28 out of 29, and in Maharashtra—along with Shiv Sena—the BJP earned 41 out of 48. The party enjoyed a further upswing until it lost three major states to Congress in state polls in December 2018. In 2019, the BJP repeated its performance by winning all the seats in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, while retaining its hold in the Hindi heartland—though it could not penetrate in the south, except in Karnataka.

The BJP has expanded further as a pan-national party in the past five years. In March 2015, it declared itself the largest party in India, registering 88 million members, more than China’s ruling Communist Party of China, which has 86 million members, according to party officials. It is also the richest party, surpassing the finances of Congress and other parties. BJP chief Amit Shah claimed, when the party moved into a swanky 170,000

square-foot headquarters in Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Marg in New Delhi in February 2018, that it was the biggest office owned by any political party in the world.

The BJP not only extended its appeal to northern, central, and western India, but also made some impressive gains in the faraway northeast where regional parties dominate. The BJP and its allies are now ruling in all seven northeastern states. Its spectacular victory in 2017 in Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India, its snatching of the leftist bastion of Tripura in 2018, and its experimentation with a coalition government in Jammu and Kashmir in 2015 show its pan-national expansion. (That said, the Kashmir experiment, as an alliance partner with the People's Democratic Party, did not last long, as the BJP pulled out of the government in 2018.) Even in Karnataka, the BJP emerged as the single largest party, although the Congress and the JD-S came together to stop the saffron party from forming the government in 2018.

RIGHT WING IMPACT ON INDIAN ECONOMIC SCENE

At the end of Modi's first five-year term, it was the economy that had become one of the main issues in elections for the opposition. Modi's critics claimed that he had mismanaged the economy, and that he failed to fulfil his promise of providing 20 million jobs a year. Beyond unemployment, critics also claimed that some of Modi's signature policy decisions, like Make in India (an initiative meant to bring major foreign corporations to India to help strengthen the country's manufacturing sector), also did not succeed.

Back in 1991, India introduced economic reforms, and successive governments have continued these liberalisation policies ever since. "[The] Modi government is doing the same thing. There might be some changes in emphasis but broadly the same path towards the right has been followed. To that extent it is the rightist move."²⁴ But the two big things Modi did on this front over the last five years were demonetisation (an abrupt decision to remove many currency notes from the market to reduce money laundering) and the introduction of a goods and services tax. Both were regarded as adventurous and not very successful.

Jobs and an agrarian crisis—bread and butter issues—were the main topics in the 2019 polls, although Modi tried to divert attention on those issues by focusing on terror, national security, and Hindutva. In 2019, he set the bar high, as the BJP manifesto committed to making India a \$5 trillion economy by 2025 and a \$10 trillion one by 2032. It has promised to make India the third largest economy in the world by 2030.

Even today, though, the market economy has been deregulated and the state continues to remain very important. “Nobody wants to dilute the state because in India you have very uneven levels of income. Poverty is still an important issue and so is redistribution of wealth.”²⁵ At one level, a big challenge for all political parties is to consider the facilities for welfare measures and how to prop up people’s purchasing power in a country where more than 60 percent are poor. The question therefore is whether this could be a rightward challenge. “Rajiv Gandhi began the liberalisation, Narasimha Rao took it to one level, Vajpayee to another level, Manmohan Singh took it to yet another level, and now Prime Minister Modi has taken it further. So in economic policies there is a lot of rightward slant but still there is the problem of what is the safety net you accord to the population.”²⁶ Modi’s challenge is to balance between the pro-reform interests and the hawks of the RSS on economic policies because he needs the support of both.

Indeed, the RSS would like to have its say on economic policies. The scholar Walter Anderson has pointed out that the RSS views Modi’s economics with scepticism. There is a conflict of interest here. Modi is more open to foreign direct investment and foreign trade than the RSS would like. His demonetisation and goods and services tax (GST) initiatives directly hurt small traders—the RSS’s original core base. The RSS has leveraged India’s changing political context to nudge the BJP government in a more economically populist direction, and in many cases the government policies have the mark of the RSS.

The Modi government is going back to protectionist tendencies, bowing to the pressures of right-wing hawks. Consequently, in the past five years, three world-renowned economists—Raghuram Rajan, Arvind Panigariya, and Arvind Subramaniam—have left the government to go back to their jobs in the United States. Another renowned economist, Urjit Patel, who has an IMF background, resigned as Reserve Bank governor in December 2018.

Professor Ashutosh Varshney of Brown University points out that “His [Modi’s] economic policy does have pro-market elements (new bankruptcy laws, reform of indirect taxes) and he has also not been able to hide his pro-business activities, but his economics concomitantly also has non-market ‘people oriented’ elements (bank accounts for the poor, modern toilets for all, doubling farm income, farm loan waivers). Moreover, he justified demonetization in terms of mass welfare. It is another matter that the masses have been badly hurt.”²⁷

The right-wing government has introduced several policy measures simplifying regulations. The Soviet-style Planning Commission (a government advisory body) conceived by Jawaharlal Nehru has been

replaced with a new entity called Niti Ayog, but it has less powers. Other measures include the curtailment of arbitrary tax enforcement against foreign companies; auctions for government resources, including telecom spectrum and coal; and the liberalization of sectors like railways, civil aviation, construction, and defence. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code is expected to lead to a turnaround of stranded assets. The Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act is meant to eliminate shady operators. Extending contract labor to all sectors of the economy could increase “labor flexibility.” However, reformers want more, and with much more speed.

Modi’s second term is rife with challenges on the economic side. These include the need to revive growth, address a rural crisis (particularly economically struggling farmers), increase investment and consumption, rein in a fiscal deficit, tackle unemployment, and deal with rising fuel prices. On the reform side, much needs to be done in terms of the financial sector, the police, polls, land, the judiciary, and banking.

Former prime minister Manmohan Singh in a May 2019 interview accused the Modi government of leaving the economy in dire straits due to its “lack of economic vision.” He said: “Finance Ministry’s latest monthly report now reflects that the country is headed for a slowdown and it has revised the GDP growth figures for this quarter (January–April) to just 6.5 percent.”²⁸ Expressing concern, Singh added: “The current government boasts of getting investment, but the reality is that the FDI growth is at a five-year low. Core (infrastructure) sector growth is at a two-year low. Rupee has become Asia’s worst performing currency. All these are a cause of serious concern.”²⁹

Echoing similar sentiments, the *Economist* magazine noted in a comment made several weeks before the announcement of the 2019 election results: “In his five years as prime minister, Mr Modi has been neither as good for India as his cheerleaders foretold, nor as bad as his critics, including this newspaper, imagined. But today the risks still outweigh the rewards. Indians, who are in the midst of voting in a fresh election would be better off with a different leader.”³⁰

RIGHT-WING IMPACT ON INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Prime Minister Modi’s engagement with India’s foreign policy is in line with the party’s 2014 manifesto, which says: “The vision is to fundamentally reboot and reorient the foreign policy goals, content and process, in a manner that locates India’s global strategic engagement in a new paradigm and on a wider canvass, that is not just limited to political

diplomacy, but also includes economic, scientific, cultural, political and security interests, both regional and global on the principles of equality and mutuality, so that it leads to an economically stronger India, and its voice is heard in the international fora.”³¹

In 2014, Modi said in an interview that he believed in Hindutva. “And I am confident my Hindutva face will be an asset when dealing with foreign affairs with other nations.”³² In reality, not much of the Hindutva trend was seen in Indian foreign policy during Modi’s first term, though he did try to connect it by focusing on yoga and the Indian diaspora using religious diplomacy. He also tried to connect foreign policy with India’s centuries-old ties with South and Southeast Asia. As for refugees, the Modi government has been willing to accept Hindu refugees but not Muslim refugees from neighboring countries (mostly from Bangladesh). India was clearly not ready to accept Rohingya refugees (a long-persecuted Muslim community) from Myanmar in 2017. It also made it clear that it would give citizenship based on religion. A bill along these lines is now pending in Parliament.

Modi did not impose the Hindutva ideology on his foreign policy, as he went about cautiously by sticking to continuity with change. In fact, he even tried to build relationships with the Arab world and with Islamic countries like Bangladesh. He invited Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in ceremony, extending a hand of friendship, and tried to continue the dialogue initially. But then he gave up when he concluded that terrorism and dialogue cannot go together.

For someone new to foreign policy, Modi began his diplomatic initiatives with aplomb. He stunned many by inviting the leaders of neighboring countries to his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014, and he went on to do more innovative things. He took several initiatives like getting U.S. President Barack Obama as the chief guest on the occasion of Republic Day in January 2015. He invited all 10 ASEAN leaders for the Republic Day celebrations as chief guests to mark the 25th anniversary of the Asia Pacific club in 2018. And in 2019, he invited Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) leaders for his swearing in ceremony.

Modi has no doubt raised India’s international profile and strengthened relations with nations ranging from the United States to Japan and Saudi Arabia. He established a good rapport with top world leaders like Xi Jinping in China, Japan’s Shinzō Abe, and President Barack Obama in the United States, though the association with Donald Trump has been bumpier. As of February 2019, he had made 48 foreign trips to six continents, visiting 92 countries including America to attend UN General Assembly meetings.

According to Indiana University Professor Sumit Ganguly, there is little question that Modi's foreign policy constitutes a departure from India's stances of the past. It is laden with both promise and peril. "The three key imperatives in Modi's foreign policy can be discerned. The first involved engaging with a number of advanced industrialized countries to boost India's economic interests. The second was designing a strategy to cope with a resurgent China. The third involved attempts to improve relations with India's neighbours as well as states in the Indian Ocean littoral also with a firm eye toward limiting China's influence. The one exception to this effort may well be India's bilateral relations with Pakistan."³³

Former foreign minister Yashwant Sinha notes that the right-wing Modi government has virtually changed the Nehruvian era's nonaligned policy. "Nonalignment is now dead for India. So have the G-15 (Group of 15) and G-77 (Group of 77)—all of them have gone. Even for formalities we should not have given up on these global institutions."³⁴

A pro-Western tilt has now become more pronounced despite India's having joined international groupings such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa).

Dasgupta notes that the prime minister has moved from India's traditional foreign policy in two directions. The first is that he has made the economy a far more important component, which is why Indian embassies abroad have been asked to focus more on it. Secondly, he has incorporated the Indian diaspora in a big way into his foreign policy.

The Indian diaspora is quite significant in the world, with 15 million migrants living in various countries. They have not only become a very important source of funding, but also an influential link with host countries. The genesis was when earlier Indian governments introduced the Person of India origin (PIO) and Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards for Indian-origin people. It also provided them with many benefits like securing life-long Indian visas and owning non-agricultural land.

Modi has not only made the diaspora feel more important, but also made them a cohesive organ. Wherever Modi goes, he meets the diaspora, however small that country may be. There has been a long-time demand from the diaspora for dual citizenship. During the 2018 Monsoon Session, India's House of Representatives passed a bill that proposes to allow non-resident Indians to use proxies to cast votes on their behalf in Indian elections.

India's neighborhood policy under Modi was perceived to be the centerpiece of his foreign policy. When Modi came to power in 2014, bilateral relations with most of India's immediate neighbours were not in

good shape. Modi realized the need for a friendly neighborhood policy, but his “Neighborhood First” concept has arguably gone nowhere. Most neighbors, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal, feel that India is interfering in their domestic affairs. They feel that India is playing the “big brother” role by interfering in their internal affairs, and they resent India’s patronizing attitude. China is making inroads in the neighborhood by investing billions of dollars. Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar are important for India’s strategic security, as they share borders not only with India, but with an overbearing China in the north. They are the crucial “strategic buffer states” on the Himalayan borders.

The BJP manifesto in 2019 promises it will forward the “Neighborhood First” policy and will focus on the acceleration of regional coordination and economic cooperation with countries in India’s neighbourhood through forums such as BIMSTEC. The Act East Policy (meant to strengthen New Delhi’s relations with countries in East Asia), cooperation with ASEAN, and ensuring an open, inclusive, prosperous and secure Indo-Pacific will be pursued vigorously, the party said in its manifesto.³⁵

Meanwhile, India’s relations with China have been on a roller coaster ride. China’s Silk Road diplomacy has yielded some positive responses from India’s neighbors, most of whom are participants in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a large transport corridor project. New Delhi decided not to be a part of this project. In 2017, bilateral ties were marred by bitterness over the \$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, followed by a 73-day standoff on the Doklam Plateau. Modi and Xi Jinping had an informal summit in Wuhan in April 2018. Under the strategic guidance of the two leaders, the two countries resumed joint military drills in 2018—but the irritants remain.

With Nepal, recent ties have not blossomed despite high-level visits from both sides. Modi’s visit in 2014 generated considerable goodwill, but subsequent decisions like supporting the Madhesis, a marginalized community that lives on the India-Nepal border, and India’s blockade of the border after Nepal’s adoption of its constitution in December 2016, helped the anti-India pitch.

Nepal’s then-prime minister, K.P. Sharma Oli, was forced to resign after a coalition partner supporting him quit, allegedly at India’s instance. Oli assumed office again in 2018 as the head of a leftist coalition. New Delhi has since reached out to him, promising to work with his government.

For decades, India was Sri Lanka’s foremost partner with regard to investment, trade, and defense. That has significantly changed in the past decade amid increasing closeness between Colombo and Beijing, and especially during Mahinda Rajapaksa’s presidency from 2005 to

2015. In early December 2017, Sri Lanka handed over the strategic port of Hambantota to China on a 99-year lease. After Maithripala Srisena took over as president, along with new Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Colombo began to tilt back toward India. New Delhi was worried in October 2018 when Srisena removed Wickremesinghe and appointed former president Rajapaksa as prime minister. After the intervention of Sri Lanka's Supreme Court, Wickremesinghe was reappointed as prime minister again in December 2018. When suspected ISIS suicide bombers rocked the island country in April 2019, India was the first to offer help.

The Maldives is also not comfortable with India. President Yameen's embrace with Beijing has caught New Delhi off guard. He has fully endorsed China's ambitious Maritime Silk Road initiative. Also, the Maldives is the second country in South Asia after Pakistan to enter into a free trade agreement with China. However, a surprise win by the opposition in the Maldives 2018 elections has improved ties with Delhi. Prime Minister Modi went to Male for the swearing-in ceremony of the new Maldives government. This was followed by a visit of the Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih to New Delhi in December 2018.

With Myanmar, the relationship has been growing since the early 1990s, with both sides keen on having stronger ties in view of strategic interests. Still, despite India's good relations with the military regime in Myanmar, the Rohingya refugee issue has brought some strains.

Bangladesh continues to be a bright spot for India's neighborhood policy. It is now at the forefront of India's counterterrorism strategy, and it has also emerged as a key gateway for India's "Act East policy." Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina's third term, which began in December 2018, and Modi's second term could take bilateral ties to a new high.

India-Pakistan relations today are perhaps at their worst level since the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. Modi paid an unscheduled visit to Lahore in December 2015 as a friendly gesture to his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif. But then came the Pathankot and Uri terror attacks. In September 2016, India launched surgical strikes in retaliation. The February 14, 2019 terror attack on Indian paramilitary forces in Pulwama in Kashmir resulted in one of the most serious escalations between the two countries in decades. In retaliation, Indian fighter jets crossed over and targeted a training camp used by the terrorist organization Jaish-e-Muhammad in Balakot in Pakistan. Modi has adopted a muscular foreign policy, which is risk-taking rather than risk averse. There is a deadlock in India-Pakistan relations that makes a resumption of dialogue a long shot for now.

By reaching through Afghanistan into Central Asia's road and railway network and other infrastructure projects, India has the potential to

emerge as a counterweight to Pakistani and Chinese influence in the region.

Iran has reason to be wary of the Modi government's growing proximity to its enemies. Coming under pressure from the United States, India has drastically reduced its oil imports from Iran. Chabahar port in Iran is crucial for India's exports to Afghanistan and the Central Asian region, and Iran is not happy with the slow pace of infrastructure development.

As expected, the right-wing Modi government has made a significant shift toward Israel and deepened ties with it. The RSS ideologically has a close affinity with Zionism. As a result, the forging of a strategic alliance with Israel and the consequent downgrading of India's commitment to the Palestinian cause has become a reality. India had close relations with the Palestinians for many years. Israel plays a critical role in India's efforts to modernize its economy, strengthen defense infrastructure, and create an ecosystem of state-of-the-art technology. In recent years, India has become the world's largest purchaser of Israeli arms and military equipment.

Meanwhile, India's all-weather friend Moscow has been drifting away. Today, India and Russia have divergent views on many issues, including on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Moscow has rejected Indian complaints about Russian arms supplies to, and joint military exercises with, Pakistan.

Modi has visited the United States five times since becoming prime minister. India-U.S. relations have reached a new high, and several high-level U.S. officials, including the secretary of state and secretary of defense, have visited India. The United States and India are now engaged in joint naval and military exercises. In economic relations, thanks in great part to sales of U.S. civil aviation and military equipment, along with crude oil, India is the largest growing market for the Americans. Significantly, Washington no longer equates India with Pakistan, though it encourages engagement between the two neighbors.

There are, however, some considerable tensions on the bilateral trade side. The Trump administration has imposed tariffs on Indian steel and aluminium products, and just a few days after Modi's inauguration in early June 2019 the U.S. government formally withdrew special trade privileges on nearly \$6 billion worth of Indian exports. In the words of Ashley Tellis: "The first order of business for Modi...is to get things off the current plateau and into the take off witnessed during the late Obama years. India cannot afford an indifferent or, worse still, an oppositional United States."³⁶

What has surprised many is the Modi government's growing engagement with the Arab world and broader Middle East. Summits with the leaders

of Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Palestine were held both in India and in their respective countries. “The growing interest in India as an economic opportunity further suggests that the wealthy Arab states will increasingly acquire a stake in New Delhi’s success,” according to Tellis. “India already remains a major customer of Gulf energy, but as India rises internationally, it will become more important to the region’s strategic interests.”³⁷ Significantly, India was invited to address the inaugural session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in March 2019—the first time India had ever been invited to an OIC session.

Ashley Tellis concludes: “Modi’s successes thus far have undoubtedly been impressive: sustaining the partnership with the United States during the convulsive early months of Donald Trump’s presidency; cementing the relationship with Japan to advance the intra-Asian balancing of China; new outreach toward the Sunni Arab states to realize meaningful forms of political and economic support for India while simultaneously strengthening ties with Israel and preserving relations with Iran; resolving long-standing irritants with Bangladesh to reset friendly ties with a country that India had a critical role in creating; and articulating a persuasive vision of order in the Indo-Pacific that not only binds the United States and India more closely but also opens doors for deeper Indian involvement in a vast swath of the globe from Africa at one end to northeast Asia at the other.”³⁸

Modi’s desire has all along been to make India a major economic and strategic player in shaping the new Asian century, and also to find a prominent place at the global high table. Sumit Ganguly is more pessimistic when he notes: “Modi entered office hoping to transform relations with China and Pakistan, dispense with India’s anachronistic commitment to nonalignment, and extend Indian influence in South and Southeast Asia. Yet despite his best efforts, he has failed to fundamentally transform his country’s foreign policy.”³⁹

THE 2019 ELECTIONS AND MODI’S WIN

The 2019 polls were a polarized battle, with the contest between “Modi and anyone but Modi.” In 2014, he was the challenger. In 2019, he was the defender of his throne. The elections became a referendum on his five-year performance.

Many political pundits believed the rise of Hindutva in 2014 to be a one-time phenomenon, but Modi came back in 2019 with a whopping 303 seats for the BJP—thereby establishing a high level of stability and continuity for right-wing politics in India. Modi’s appeals to patriotism, coupled with the belief that he has made the Hindu majority in India stronger and safer,

helped consolidate Hindu votes. In addition to the Hindi heartland, the party's impressive victories in states like Tripura, Assam, Maharashtra, Telengana, Odisha, West Bengal, and Haryana indicated a far bigger constituency of right-wing voters than had been estimated earlier.

An essay on Modi in *Time* magazine, published soon before the announcement of the election results, had noted: "The incumbent may win again—the opposition, led by Rahul Gandhi, an unteachable mediocrity and a descendant of Nehru, is in disarray—but Modi will never again represent the myriad dreams and aspirations of 2014. Then he was a messiah, ushering in a future too bright to behold, one part Hindu renaissance, one part South Korea's economic program. Now he is merely a politician who has failed to deliver, seeking re-election. Whatever else might be said about the election, hope is off the menu."⁴⁰

The election results have proved that Modi continues to be popular, and that the BJP won in his name. Additionally, the TINA factor (There Is No Alternative) helped him get votes from all sections. Modi's appeal as a strongman remained resonant, as he promised a "New India." The grievances on the agrarian crisis, demonetization, and GST blues were all offset by Modi's welfare schemes. The Balakot airstrike helped boost Modi's image as a strong leader, while the opposition failed to present a credible alternative narrative to voters. The opposition's grand plans of gobbling up a national "Grand Alliance" did not materialize, though in Uttar Pradesh there was a powerful regional alliance between the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, and Rashtriya Lok Dal. The alliance did not perform to the extent that it was expected to. In 2019, the BJP not only kept its core states—the Hindi heartland, Gujarat, and Maharashtra—but also managed fresh victories in West Bengal, Odisha, Karnataka, and the northeast. However, the BJP drew a blank in the other southern states, with the exceptions of Karnataka and Telengana. Overall, the party increased its vote share from 31 percent in 2014 to 39 percent in 2019. The BJP and its coalition partners are now ruling in 21 states and Union territories (the latter are areas governed directly by India's central government).

CONCLUSION

The 2019 elections prove that India continues to move toward right-wing politics. The BJP might achieve its goal of making India a "Hindu Rashtra" if the trend continues. After all, the BJP is already ruling on its own or with its alliance partners in 21 of the 29 states in India. In 2020, the party is likely to get its own majority in the upper house of Parliament, where it could not push many bills in the last five years.

As mentioned earlier, though the right wing streak has always been there in Indian politics, it has been gaining dominance ever since the 1980s. The BJP grew in the last three and a half decades to reach its current preeminent position mainly due to the shrinking of the space occupied by the Congress and the political left. Another reason for the BJP's ascent is the lack of leadership in the Congress and other parties. Since 2014, first-time voters have not only preferred the right-wing BJP, but also voted for it. The BJP has also had a strong leader like Modi who could market himself as well as his party. The BJP has been able to march forward because it has had cadres spread across India, and because it has had the full support of its parent organisation, the RSS.

If this trend continues, the BJP's position in India is likely to be unassailable for the next few years. If anyone thought capturing power in 2014 was a one-time phenomenon, the 2019 elections proved such naysayers wrong, as the party gained more seats than it did in 2014 and returned to power.

In its second term, the Modi government is in a hurry to implement the BJP's core agenda. With the party emerging stronger than ever, adding more muscle to Prime Minister Modi's intent, within 50 days of coming back to power the government was able to push through the controversial Triple Talaq bill, which has done away with the Muslim practice of saying Talaq thrice to divorce one's wife. Prime Minister Modi has claimed that the bill would ensure empowerment of Muslim women and provide them gender justice. Though there was opposition from some parties like the Congress in Parliament, the bill sailed through even in the Rajya Sabha where the BJP is in a minority because the BJP floor managers were able to get support by dividing the opposition and isolating the Congress.

Encouraged by this possibility that the government could push through any bill, the Modi government stunned everyone by scrapping Article 370 and 35A pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir at one stroke and got measures passed on the same day with the support of some opposition parties. This is a game changer for the conflict-torn state. Simultaneously, the state has been bifurcated into two Union Territories: Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.

Indeed, removing these two articles was one of the biggest promises the BJP made before the 2019 polls. While Article 370 grants special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Article 35A empowers the state Assembly to define permanent residents for the purpose of bestowing special rights to them.

The revocation of the two articles fundamentally altered the Kashmir issue both internally and internationally. This unprecedented bold move has made Jammu and Kashmir an integral part of India. The quickness with

which the government tabled the bills in Parliament stunned everyone. The government kept it a closely guarded secret and unusually, the bills were circulated even to the lawmakers only after the Union Home Minister Amit Shah tabled the bills in Rajya Sabha on August 5 and the bills were passed on the same day after a hurried four-hour discussion. While the Modi government explained that the measure was needed for development of the state, local Kashmiri parties like National Conference and PDP argue that New Delhi had betrayed the people of Kashmir by removing the special status granted to it under the Constitution. Fortunately for Modi, the measure received nationwide support even from some opposition parties.

However, what is of concern is the future. For the past three generations, the children in the Kashmir Valley have grown up with the noise of guns. The youth are restless and the government has to address their needs. The Indian government will have a huge task to deal with in the aftermath of the scrapping of Article 370. It might take a lot of effort and patience to bring back normalcy and bridge the trust deficit.

As for the external impact, a stunned Pakistan has been trying to internationalize the Kashmir issue while New Delhi maintains that it is an internal affair. As retaliation, Pakistan has promptly downgraded diplomatic ties with India, discontinued the Samjhuktha express, ended trade links, and closed the Wagha border. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan fears that New Delhi might plan to take over the Pakistan-administered Kashmir as a next step. To Khan's disappointment, Washington has come up with a muted response to what Khan has described as an outrage and has adopted a 'wait and watch' policy. The U.S. President Donald Trump, who offered to mediate before the 'fait accompli' is now keeping mum. But in case of any conflict, the United States might try to step in to bring down the temperature. The international community is quite cautious in its reaction, but as expected Pakistan has already internationalized it by taking it to the UN Security Council with the help of China, though the discussions were held behind closed doors.

The issue of Kashmir will continue to hog the headlines for some time to come. One thing is clear: Prime Minister Modi has an unenviable task both at home and abroad. His domestic challenge is to bring back normalcy as soon as possible while his challenge abroad is to build diplomatic opinion in favour of India.

The BJP, emboldened by the way it could push through the Triple Talaq and Article 370, might go ahead with the building of Ram temple in Ayodhya if the court rules in its favor. The party is also impatient to bring a uniform civil code, another core agenda point, which is applicable to all citizens. Indeed Modi is getting ready for his poll campaign for 2024.

What does the right-wing dominance mean for the Congress and left parties? The left is almost in a coma stage, and unless it moves more in step with the present generation, it cannot be revived. As for the Congress, it needs to reorient itself and come up with new programs to attract voters. Otherwise, the country will continue to move toward the right wing further.

Varshney notes: “There is no doubt in my mind that for the ideologues of the BJP and RSS, including the highest rungs of leadership, not simply the so-called fringe, this election has endorsed the project of Hindu nationalism—namely, the creation of a Hindu majoritarian state and polity.”⁴¹

Indian minorities might continue to have apprehensions about their future, though since being re-elected Modi has spoken eloquently about his intention to have an inclusive politics. The 2019 elections were the first test of whether the right wing can sustain itself in India. Dasgupta notes that there will always be a significant right in India in the coming years. “How significant it is depends on various factors.”⁴²

Are Modi’s India and Trump’s America (and their like) separate vertical happenings—simultaneous but discrete—or do they reflect some kind of connected, horizontal, global evolution that will touch polities everywhere? According to Professor Ralph Buultjens, “It is perhaps too early to say whether what we see will be lasting or a temporary phenomenon... but the impact, in a relatively brief time, has been remarkably powerful suggesting that we may be witnessing the beginnings of some major transformation in the functional infrastructure of politics.”⁴³

Endnotes

1. Audrey Sheeny, "The rise of the far right," *Harvard Political Review*, February 11, 2017, <https://harvardpolitics.com/world/rise-of-far-right/>.
2. Author's interview with Ralph Buultjens, August 18, 2018, New Delhi.
3. Andre Tartar, 'How the populist right is redrawing the map of Europe,' *Bloomberg*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>.
4. Author's interview, May 2, 2018, Bellagio, Italy.
5. Author's interview with Sahasrabuddhe, May 18, 2018, New Delhi.
6. Swapan Dasgupta, "Is This Really the First Right Wing Government?" *Forbes*, August 14, 2014, <http://www.forbesindia.com/article/independence-day-special/is-this-really-the-first-rightwing-government/38419/1>.
7. Author's interview with Sheila Dixit, June 2, 2018, New Delhi.
8. Author's interview with Swapan Dasgupta, July 18, 2018, New Delhi.
9. Conrad Hackett, "By 2050, India to Have World's Largest Populations of Hindus and Muslims," Fact Tank, Pew Research Center, April 21, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/21/by-2050-india-to-have-worlds-largest-populations-of-hindus-and-muslims/>.
10. Gyan Verma, BJP joins international Democratic Union, *Livemint*, February 27, 2016, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/88H4qUDAvAoNMjeyladNdL/BJP-joins-International-Democratic-Union.html>.
11. Author's interview with Yashwant Sinha, February 23, 2018, New Delhi.
12. Author's interview with Ahmed Patel, August 18, 2018, New Delhi.
13. Author's interview with Sahasrabuddhe, May 18, 2018, New Delhi.
14. Subhas Munshi, "RSS Has Mixed Take on Modi Govt, Feels PM Hasn't Done Enough on Job Creation: Walter Anderson," *News 18*, August 4, 2018, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/rss-has-mixed-take-on-modi-govt-feels-pm-hasnt-done-enough-on-job-creation-walter-anderson-1833641.html>.
15. Smriti Kak Ramachandran, "RSS Playing a Mediator Role, Says Author Walter Andersen," *Hindustan Times*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rss-playing-a-mediator-role-says-author-walter-andersen/story-c9IBmnSXfdYBDWyBJogVFI.html>.
16. "Mahatma Gandhi Legacy Inspiration in Dealing with Intolerance: US," PTI, February 6, 2015, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/gandhis-legacy-inspiration-in-dealing-with-intolerance-us/article6864603.ece>.
17. Author's interview with Swapan Dasgupta, July 18, 2018, New Delhi.
18. Prakash Karat, "Countering the Right Wing Offensive in India, P.Sundarayya Memorial Lecture," 2001, <https://www.cpim.org/content/countering-right-wing-offensive-india>.
19. Author's interview with Ashok Malik, September 24, 2018, New Delhi.

20. "India's Business Favors Narendra Modi To Be PM: Poll," Livemint.com, September 6, 2013, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/HmcZzc60ll1sKfRCPCOqYK/India-business-favours-Narendra-Modi-to-be-PM-poll.html>.
21. Malini Goyal, "So, How Good or Bad Modi's Five Years Really Were? India's CEOs Give Their Report Card," *Economic Times*, April 7, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/how-modi-govt-performed-heres-what-ceos-think/articleshow/68755690.cms>.
22. Nivedita Mookerji, "Parties Get Talking with Corporate India as Election Draws closer," *Business Standard*, April 6, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/elections/parties-get-talking-with-corporate-india-as-election-draws-closer-119040600829_1.html.
23. Author's interview with Ashok Malik, September 24, 2018, New Delhi.
24. Author's interview with Swapan Dasgupta, July 18, 2019, New Delhi.
25. Author's interview with Swapan Dasgupta, July 18, 2018, New Delhi.
26. Ibid.
27. Ashutosh Varshney, "Is Narendra Modi a Populist?" *Indian Express*, October 23, 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-prime-minister-narendra-modi-a-populist-populism-democracy-donald-trump-pro-hindu-4901786/>.
28. "India Headed for Slowdown, Modi Government Left Economy in 'Dire Straits': Ex PM Manmohan Singh," Press Trust of India, May 5, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/india-headed-for-slowdown-modi-govt-left-economy-in-dire-straits-ex-pm-manmohan-singh-119050500450_1.html.
29. Ibid.
30. "Under Narendra Modi, India's Ruling Party Poses a Threat to Democracy," *The Economist*, May 4, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/05/04/under-narendra-modi-indias-ruling-party-poses-a-threat-to-democracy>.
31. BJP Election Manifesto 2014, https://www.bjp.org/images/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf. Ankit Panda, "Modi: Hindutva Will Be an Asset in Foreign Affairs," *The Diplomat*, April 24, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/modi-hindutva-will-be-an-asset-in-foreign-affairs/>.
32. Sumit Ganguly, "Hindu Nationalism and the Foreign Policy of India's Bharatiya Janata party," Transatlantic Academy, 2014-15 paper series No 2, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/hindu-nationalism-and-foreign-policy-indias-bharatiya-janata-party>.
33. Author's interview with Yashwant Sinha, February 23, 2018, New Delhi.
34. "BJP Manifesto on Foreign Policy: Terrorism, Formation of Space Alliances on Agenda," *Statesman*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/bjp-manifesto-on-foreign-policy-terrorism-formation-of-space-alliance-on-agenda-1502743938.html>.
35. Ashley Tellis, "Modi's Three Foreign Policy Wins," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment>.

org/2019/03/24/modi-s-three-foreign-policy-wins-pub-78675.

36. Ibid.
37. Ashley Tellis, "Troubles Aplenty: Foreign Policy Challenges for the Next Indian Government," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/20/troubles-aplenty-foreign-policy-challenges-for-next-indian-government-pub-79161>.
38. Sumit Ganguly, "Modi's Foreign Policy Revolution?" *Foreign Affairs*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2018-03-08/modis-foreign-policy-revolution>.
39. Aatish Taseer, "Can India Endure Another Five Years of a Modi Government?" *Time*, May 9, 2019, <https://time.com/5586415/india-election-narendra-modi-2019/>.
40. Ashutosh Varshney, "Transfiguring India," *Indian Express*, May 27, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-bjp-rahul-gandhi-lok-sabha-elections-2019-5749518/>.
41. Author's interview with Swapan Dasgupta, October 19, 2018, New Delhi.
42. Author's interview with Ralph Buultjens, August 18, 2018, New Delhi.

About the Author

Kalyani Shankar is a political commentator and a syndicated columnist. She was formerly the political editor and Washington correspondent of *Hindustan Times*, a major Indian newspaper. She has also served as a press fellow at Cambridge University and as a public policy fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center. Shankar is also a founder member of the Indian women press corps.

