



# India Election 2019: Modi's Victory Signals Growing Far Right Intolerance in India and Around the World

By Rasna Warah



The re-election of Narendra Modi as India's Prime Minister (his second term) is hardly surprising but does signify a worrying global trend of increasing intolerance and xenophobia. India's weakened opposition - personified by the lacklustre and lightweight Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi - had no chance in a country riding on a wave of nationalism that equates Hinduism with patriotism. Rahul Gandhi's lineage (he is the son of former Prime Minister Rahul Gandhi, the grandson of India's "Iron Lady", Indira Gandhi, and the great grandson of India's founding father, Jawaharlal Nehru) failed to attract sufficient voters, perhaps because the Gandhi family is associated with the kind of dynastic politics that Modi says he is eschewing. (Modi never fails to remind Indians that he is the son of a tea seller who rose through the ranks without the support of any political godfather or dynastic family.)

Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have been selling the narrative that the Hindu religion and way of life have been undermined by centuries of subjugation of the Indian people, first by Muslim Mughal conquerors/emperors, then by British colonialists, and finally by the secularist (read Congress) politicians who led India to independence and thereafter imposed a socialist mindset on the country's governance. This narrative also feeds off the decades-old rivalry between India and

Pakistan that began when India split into two countries at independence in 1947.

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As the activist and author Arundhati Roy quipped, being a Muslim in Modi's India is now considered unpatriotic. "Of late, the criterion for being considered anti-national has been made pretty simple: If you don't vote for Narendra Modi, you're a Pakistani. I don't know how Pakistan feels about its growing population." (The number of Muslims in India is almost the same as the number of Muslims in Pakistan, around 180 million.)

Despite not keeping many of his promises (like improving the lot of India's struggling farmers), Modi managed to rally his countrymen and women behind him. The reasons for this are many, among them a compliant and conservative Indian media, which did not challenge his divisive politics. As one Indian commentator put it, "A major section of the media has been a willing accomplice in the marketing of the Modi cult and the over-selling of the government's performance in various 'schemes'."

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Indeed, the mainstream media and journalists have been under increasing attack in recent years by the BJP government. Journalists have also been targeted for assassination by Hindu fundamentalist groups, among the most recent case being that of Gauri Lankesh, an outspoken left-wing journalist who was killed outside her house in Bangalore in 2017.

### **Elitist politics**

Modi's victory perhaps reflects an Indian electorate that is fed up with the elitist kind of politics associated with the Congress Party, which, despite (or perhaps because of) its secular credentials, failed to inspire a majority of the country's people who have lost faith in the institutions that Nehru and his successors in the Congress party set up. As Ramesh Thakur commented in an op-ed piece in the *Times of India*, "Inevitably this [Congress Party culture] morphed into the VIP culture that Indians by and large detest with a depth of contempt, anger and resentment" - a situation that Modi fully exploited.

Aatish Taseer explained some of the reasons for Modi's victory in a recent *TIME* magazine article:

*"The nation's most basic norms, such as the character of the Indian state, its founding fathers, the place of minorities and its institutions, from universities to corporate houses to the media, were shown to be severely distrusted. The cherished achievement of independent India - secularism, liberalism, a free press - came to be seen in the eyes of many as part of a grand conspiracy in which a deracinated Hindu elite, in cahoots with minorities from the monotheistic faiths, such as Christianity and Islam, maintained its dominion over India's Hindu majority. Modi's victory was an expression of that distrust."*

Modi's and his party's supporters claim that he has brought India into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and rather than being a traditionalist, he is actually a modernising reformer. (However, as he himself has pointed out, he does not equate Westernisation with modernisation; rather, he sees all the trappings of modernity in India, such as being fluent in English, drinking alcohol or eating meat, as contrary to the Hindu ethos of vegetarianism and spiritual purity. (Alcohol and meat are no longer on the menu at state banquets and several states in India have banned the eating of beef.)

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But Modi's claim that he is taking India into modernity are not entirely accurate. India under the leadership of the Congress Party's Oxford-educated Manmohan Singh, first as Finance Minister, then as Prime Minister, ushered in the first wave of liberalisation in the early 1990s, which opened up the economy to foreign investment and led to the deregulation and privatisation of various sectors. Modi is simply riding on the back of that first wave, which, fortunately, also coincided with rising economic growth, which catapulted millions of Indians into the middle classes.

Modi's main appeal lies in his ability to convince a majority of India's people that he is a reformist that can uproot India's entrenched corruption and make government bureaucracy less cumbersome by ushering in a business- and private sector-friendly environment that can compete with the likes of China and the United States.

He also appeals to the aspirational instincts of India's rising middle classes, who are eager for a cleaner, more efficient India. They say that the BJP has increased the country's economic potential by building new roads, highways and airports. This is evident in cities such as Mumbai and New Delhi, where the infrastructure has been markedly improved in some areas. The Prime Minister's campaign to clean up India and improve access to sanitation has also been welcomed by a population used to seeing filth on the streets of Indian cities and villages. He even managed to mesmerise some leading Bollywood stars, who not only campaigned for him, but even stood as candidates on a BJP ticket.

### **Hindutva and fascism**

Modi is no doubt a charismatic and disciplined leader, but his brand of politics can also be dangerous for a nation, especially a nation as vast, diverse and complex as India. He represents a particular kind of nationalism-cum-populism that has the potential to fragment a country irreversibly and take it back to place where rights and freedoms are arbitrarily - not universally - applied.

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While paying lip service to secularism, Modi has entrenched an insidious form of Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) that has allowed anti-Muslim, anti-Christian and anti-Dalit (lower caste) sentiments to flourish. Physical attacks and violence against non-Hindu groups and individuals have risen in recent years and the image of India as a country that accepts all religions is being severely eroded. India, a

land of immense diversity and where virtually every religion in the world has found a safe home, is now being touted as land for and of only Hindus.

The BJP has also embarked on propagating a revisionist history of India that fails to recognise that the subcontinent has never been a purely Hindu entity; it has been an amalgam of different religions for centuries, and Hinduism itself has undergone various transformations since its birth some four thousand years ago. In fact, one could say that India has never been a purely Hindu country, and that Hinduism is not so much a religion as it is a way of life that is interpreted differently by every Hindu, depending on her God, what region she hails from, and what caste group she belongs to.

Unfortunately, Modi epitomises the kind of neo-fascist right-wing leadership that is sweeping across some parts of Europe, the United States, South America, Asia, and even Africa, where the likes of Donald Trump, Victor Orban, Benjamin Netanyahu, Rodrigo Duterte and Jair Bolsonaro are imposing intolerant, highly regressive policies that polarise populations and create false “them-versus-us” narratives. Brexit and growing neo-Nazi and racist groups in Europe and the United States have further fuelled the idea that outsiders are to blame for a nation’s woes. In India, Modi’s Hindutva has emboldened Hindu chauvinists who no longer feel they need to hide their hatred for other races and religions. In all these places, democratic institutions are being weakened and the media and intellectuals are being vilified. Fascism – the feverish exaltation of ethnicity, race, nation or religion above the rights of the individual – has become the new normal.

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There is also an inherent anti-intellectualism in these leaders’ statements and a propensity to install pliant and mediocre people whose only qualifications are sycophancy and blind loyalty to the leadership. In the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, for instance, the BJP appointed a hate-mongering Hindu priest as chief minister, and did not suffer any consequences for this grave mistake. These trends, not just in India, but in many parts of the world, should worry all those committed to promoting human rights and democratic values.

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