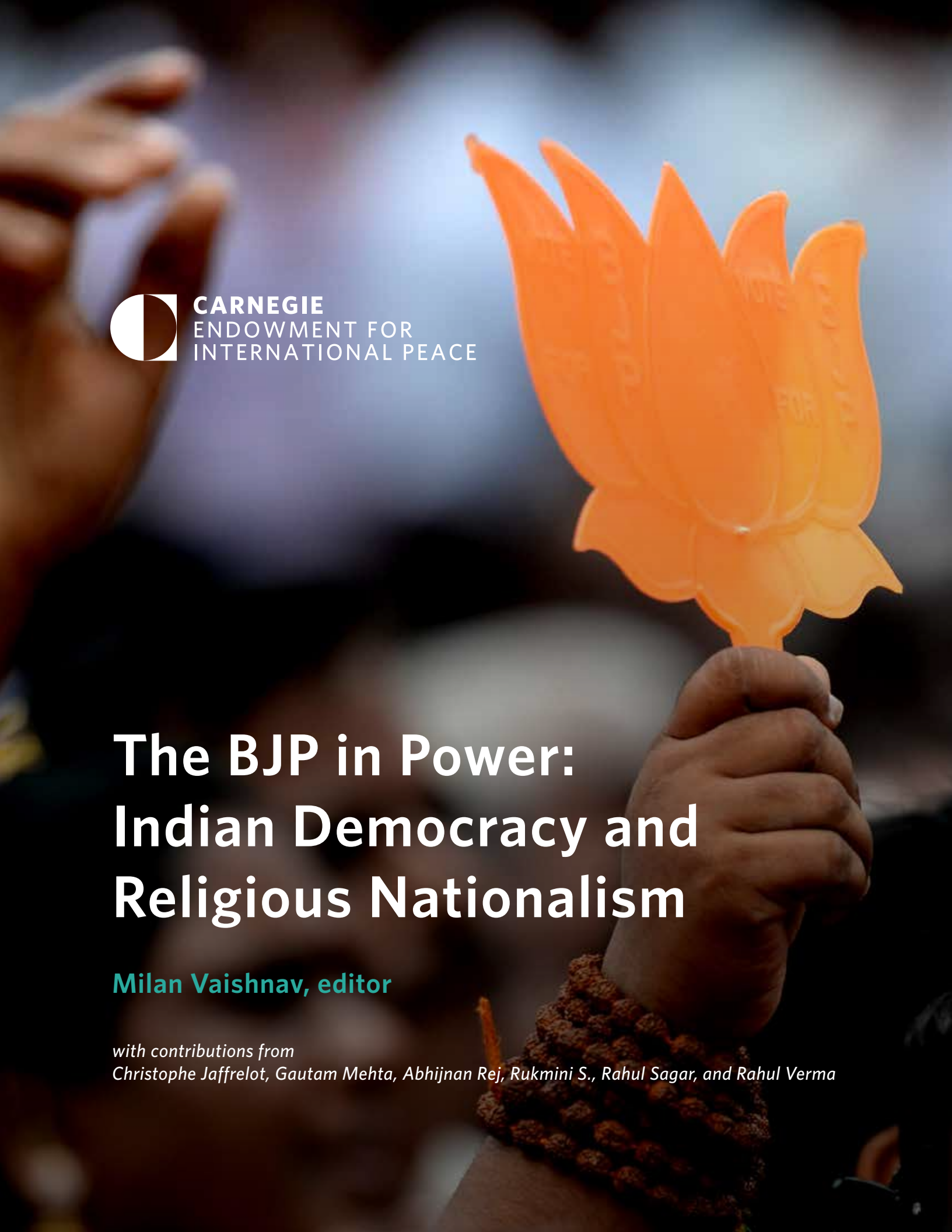

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The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism

Milan Vaishnav, editor

with contributions from
Christophe Jaffrelot, Gautam Mehta, Abhijnan Rej, Rukmini S., Rahul Sagar, and Rahul Verma

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Milan Vaishnav
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MILAN VAISHNAV

In the spring of 2019, nearly 900 million Indians will be eligible to cast their ballots in the country's seventeenth general election held since independence in 1947.[1] As is the case with each successive Indian election, this year's contest will be the largest democratic exercise in recorded history. While the election will influence the direction of India's economy, the country's foreign policy, and the dynamics between New Delhi and India's state capitals, the campaign's outcome will also determine the contours of India's future as a secular republic dedicated to upholding the country's unparalleled diversity and committed to embracing ethnic and religious pluralism.

Around the world, there has been a resurgence of political movements inspired by religious nationalism in many democracies. This blending of democratic politics with religious fervor is apparent in settings as diverse as the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia. India is a vital case in this regard, on account of both its size and its democratic longevity. The comingling of religion and politics is hardly a new development on the Indian subcontinent. When India's founders framed the country's constitution following independence and amid the horror of the Partition, they decided to commit the polity to a doctrine of secularism that differed from prevailing Western notions. India's constitution did not establish a strict church-state separation but rather instituted a "principled distance" between religion and the state whereby the state would embrace all of India's many religious faiths without unduly favoring any one tradition.[2]

Although this careful balance was largely preserved in the early years after independence, it did not take long for this blurry line to be crossed. In practice, India's secular politicians often championed the cause of secularism but opportunistically manipulated religion when doing so proved politically expedient. In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—a party built on an ideological foundation of Hindu nationalism—came to power on the backs of the first single-party majority in India's parliament in three decades. Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who formerly served as the chief minister of the state of Gujarat for more than a dozen years, the BJP trounced the incumbent Congress Party, which had governed India for much of Indian political history since independence. Accusing the Congress Party of engaging in "pseudo-secularism" and appeasing India's minority communities at the expense of the country's overwhelming Hindu majority, the BJP experienced a resurgence that signaled a shift toward a muscular, pro-Hindu brand of nationalism. Building on its historic 2014 performance, the BJP has since methodically expanded its footprint across large swathes of India, snatching political territory away from the Congress Party and many of its regional opponents.

It is important to assess the role Hindu nationalism is playing in India's democracy under the political leadership of the BJP 2.0, a term used to distinguish the current iteration of the party under Modi from its earlier avatar under the tandem of prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and senior lawmaker L.K. Advani. As the political affiliate of the Sangh Parivar, the family of Hindu nationalist organizations led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP was widely expected to implement pro-Hindu policies under the tutelage of its ideological affiliates. In practice, the relationship between the Sangh and the BJP has proven more complicated due to a mix of factors, from political pragmatism to Modi's outsize persona. In power, the Modi government has deferred immediate action on several of the Sangh's most controversial, long-standing priorities, choosing instead to allow space—mainly at the subnational level—for pro-Hindu social policies.

Ahead of the pivotal 2019 election, the outcome of which remains uncertain, five dimensions related to the ascendance of Hindu nationalism and its consequences for India's political life are worth a closer look.

- **What are the BJP 2.0's core ideological beliefs?** Although scholars have often bemoaned the lack of ideological content in Indian politics, it would be a mistake to label the country's elections as ideologically vapid. While political parties in India cannot be arrayed on a simple left-right spectrum, as they are in many advanced democracies, Indian politics is deeply riven by differences of opinion on questions of state intervention and official recognition of identity-based status differences. Under Modi, the party successfully united economic and social conservatives, who together became the foundation of a powerful coalition. Maintaining ideological coherence will be an uphill task: BJP supporters who frown on state intervention in economic and social life do not universally embrace the party's Hindu majoritarianism. Left unaddressed, these emerging fault lines could disrupt the party's cohesion.

- **What powered the BJP's once-in-a-generation 2014 electoral victory?** Since 1989, India has been governed by a series of unsteady coalition governments, many of which have struggled to complete their full terms in office. Against a backdrop of an electorate fragmented across caste and religious lines, the BJP succeeded in constructing a pan-Hindu vote in a small but critical number of electorally pivotal states. The party's ability to efficiently translate less than a third of the total vote into a parliamentary majority was a testament to Modi's own charisma and unique popularity.[3] While the BJP's national campaign focused on issues of development and good governance, it selectively deployed Hindu nationalist tropes in pockets of the country where it believed such appeals would resonant. The prospects of the BJP replicating its 2014 performance in 2019 seem unlikely, especially given the internal contradictions emerging within the party's cross-caste coalition.

- **What impact is the ascendance of Hindu nationalism having on secularism in India and the posture of secular parties?** The rapid success of the BJP in conquering new political territory has prompted many commentators to note that the party has become the new center of gravity in Indian domestic politics, replacing the once-dominant Congress Party. The BJP's Hindutva agenda has become more acceptable in mainstream discourse at a time when secular nationalism has been widely discredited. Indeed, secular-minded parties such as the Congress and (nominally) apolitical arms of the state such as the judiciary—especially at lower levels—have gravitated toward more pro-Hindu positions, raising the question of whether there is a politically viable contender able and willing to reclaim the mantle of secular nationalism in the years to come.

- **What relevance has Hindu nationalist ideology had for economic policymaking under the BJP**

2.0? Given the party's focus on economic reforms and good governance in the 2014 campaign, there was a great deal of speculation as to how the BJP would balance its economic agenda with the more nationalist preferences of the Sangh Parivar once in power. Ultimately—and to the surprise of many observers—there has been more convergence between the economic priorities of the two entities. For its part, the Sangh has adopted a more pragmatic approach in which it has selectively picked its battles, understanding that it must not overplay its hand if it is to stay relevant. The BJP government, on the other hand, has faced political pressures to temper many of its pro-market positions.

- **How has Hindu nationalism come to shape the foreign policy decisionmaking of the BJP 2.0?** Hindu nationalist foreign policy doctrine emphasizes the acquisition of hard power capabilities. Former BJP prime minister Vajpayee—as is evident from the 1998 nuclear tests conducted on his watch, his hawkish approach to Pakistan, and his pragmatic outreach to the United States—embodied the realist approach favored by Hindu nationalist thinkers. Lofty rhetoric notwithstanding, Modi has been less successful at enhancing India's hard power capabilities—failing to undertake significant domestic economic reforms or plug gaps in India's defense capacities. What distinguishes Modi's foreign policy is the emphasis he has placed on India's civilizational values, deploying religious diplomacy and soft power to bolster India's place in the world. His efforts to transform India from a "balancing" to a "leading" power, however, will run aground in the absence of social stability and economic prosperity at home.[4]

CHAPTER 1

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM AND INDIA'S FUTURE

MILAN VAISHNAV

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, religiously inspired nationalist movements have gained prominence in several countries around the world. Few cases are more worthy of greater study than India—thanks both to its size and its democratic longevity. As the world's largest democracy, India is home to one-quarter of the world's voters and one-sixth of humanity.[5] Political developments in India, therefore, are likely to have broader repercussions throughout South Asia and across the democratic world.

India is not alone in facing the challenges that accompany religious nationalism: many democracies worldwide are witnessing a rise in such political movements. The widespread use of religiously inspired political appeals can be detected in places as diverse as Turkey, Latin America, Western Europe, and the post-Soviet states.[6] For instance, in the 2018 Costa Rican presidential runoff election, voters for evangelical populist candidate Fabricio Alvarado reportedly rallied behind the mantra that "if a man of God can't govern us, then nobody can."[7] In his recent successful bid for the Brazilian presidency, right-wing populist candidate Jair Bolsonaro similarly campaigned on the slogan, "Brazil before everything, and God above all."[8] In Indonesia, meanwhile, Islamic nationalists allied with anti-Chinese xenophobes and economic nationalists to oust Jakarta's Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama and convict him on blasphemy charges.[9]

While religious nationalist movements exhibit considerable variation, they appear to share many common attributes. First, most religious nationalist parties possess a puritanical streak that colors their electoral platforms—and subsequent methods of governance—with a moral cadence. Second, in many countries, religious nationalists use moral appeals and rhetoric to advocate for economic austerity or draconian anticorruption measures. Third, religious politics often betrays a majoritarian nationalism, which seeks to redefine the basis of national identity in a manner that excludes or marginalizes religious minorities.

In the case of India, the commingling of religion and politics is hardly novel. This mixing first began with state patronage of the Brahminical Vedic tradition in which state backing of religion ensured that clerical

"The BJP's electoral resurgence of late has once more brought an alternative nationalism to the fore, one based not on secular principles but rather on the premise that Indian culture is coterminous with Hindu culture."

leaders would, in turn, protect the state.[10] In India's earliest state formations, the *rajas* (kings) wielded political power but were reliant on the legitimation of *brahmins* (priestly caste) whom they compensated with guarantees of safety and material resources. One unique aspect of India's development is the degree of moral authority brahmins enjoyed independent of the power of the state—a stark contrast to China, for instance, where religious authorities were subservient to elites possessing coercive and economic power.[11]

When India obtained independence following the ouster of the British Raj in 1947, the country's new constitution established a secular republic that did not feature a strict church-state separation, as in many Western democracies, but rather a "principled distance" between religion and the state.[12] The government, under this rubric, endeavored to maintain a measured embrace of India's disparate religious communities without unduly favoring any one group.

Over the decades, politicians frequently have violated this (admittedly blurry) line, often cynically and out of calculated political compulsion. The leadership of the Indian National Congress (or Congress Party), which ruled India for much of the postindependence period, traditionally has championed its commitment to secular nationalism. But, in practice, the Congress Party often has invoked religious sentiments to suit its changing political interests—a tendency that grew in intensity under the reign of former prime minister Indira Gandhi.

Since the late 1990s, India's electoral milieu has seen a surge of religious content with the electoral success of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Although the BJP's star dimmed for much of the 2000s, it has undergone a renaissance over the past five years under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP's electoral resurgence of late has once more brought an alternative nationalism to the fore, one based not on secular principles but rather on the premise that Indian culture is coterminous with Hindu culture. This departure from India's secular tradition, which itself was initially damaged by the self-inflicted wounds of the Congress Party, raises difficult questions about India's political future and its long-standing commitment to the credo of "unity in diversity."[13]

DUELING NATIONALISMS

A key axis of political and cultural conflict in modern India pertains to competing visions of nationalism within the overarching framework of India's democratic governance. When India's constitution was being drafted, and even before, there was a robust debate about India's national identity and the values and norms that should underpin the "idea of India."[14] Thanks to the political dominance of the Congress Party and with due deference to the country's extraordinary diversity, secular nationalism came to define India's post-1947 identity.

Under the tutelage of the country's inaugural prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's postcolonial leadership embarked on an ambitious project of nation-building by refusing to privilege any one religion above all others—as they feared that favoring one religious group could upend India's nascent social compact.[15] Because India's secularists achieved such a dominant victory in the early years of the republic, it is easy to forget that there was a dueling nationalism that may

have been defeated, but which hardly disappeared from the scene entirely. The alternative conception of India's identity, Hindu nationalism, has a lineage that actually pre-dates its secular competitor, and today Hindu majoritarianism is ascendant.[16]

According to political scientist Ashutosh Varshney, three competing themes have fought for political dominance since the emergence of the Indian national movement. First, there is the territorial notion of India, which emphasizes the fact that the land between the Indus River to the west, the Himalaya Mountains to the north, and the seas to the south and east comprise India's "sacred geography."[17] A second conception, the cultural notion, is the idea that Indian society is defined by the values of tolerance, pluralism, and syncretism. The final theme stresses religion, which is to say that the land known as India is originally the homeland of the Hindu community. While different religious communities may call India home, proponents of this third viewpoint see India as fundamentally belonging to the Hindu majority.[18]

The two nationalisms prevalent in India today largely stem from different combinations of these notions, Varshney argues. While both are committed to India's sovereign territorial boundaries, they diverge thereafter. Secular nationalism combines a commitment to territorial integrity with the cultural notion of political pluralism, while Hindu nationalism blends territorial unity with Hindutva, or the belief that India is fundamentally a polity by, for, and of the majority Hindu community.

Secular Nationalism

In brief, proponents of the secular nationalist vision of India maintained that the multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups that call the country home should find a place within its sovereign boundaries without being subject to any discrimination or prejudice. Yet India's variant of secularism differs quite significantly from prevailing Western notions, which enforce a strict separation between church and state to foster civic peace and equal rights for all citizens. As political theorist Rajeev Bhargava has argued, the Western manifestation of secularism does not define the totality of secular doctrine the world over; the notion of a strict church-state separation is but one possible manifestation of secularism in practice.[19] The form of secularism India's constitutional framers chose to pursue is one that forgoes a strict separation but instead imposes a "principled distance" between religion and the state.[20]

On the one hand, the Indian Constitution possesses many of the attributes of a classically secular state. It endows citizens with religious liberty and strictly prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, as well as caste, sex, place of birth, and other factors. The country's constitution also grants every citizen universal suffrage without regard to one's religion or station in life, thus departing from the practice in most democracies (including the United States), which extended the franchise only gradually to women, minority groups, and the lower classes.[21]

However, the Indian Constitution also provides ample grounds for the state to interfere in religious affairs. For instance, the constitution recognizes group rights as well as community rights, including the rights of religious minorities. Under the law, the state is committed to aid educational institutions administrated by religious organizations. Therefore, not only can the state legitimately interject in the country's religious affairs, it can also do so without the constraints of neutrality. As Bhargava points out, the commitment to "principled distance" is not the same as "equal distance"; in other words, the state can take measures to tackle illiberal social aspects of one religion (for example, the caste system in Hinduism) without necessarily taking corresponding steps to address other illiberal practices in Islam or Christianity.[22] While the state might strive to take equivalent action with regard to all faiths, its ability to do so depends on numerous factors that include prevailing political conditions, the ability of a given religious community to reform from

within, the nature of the social ill to be remedied, and the competing obligation that the government faces to protect minority religions.

Contrary to what critics may claim, secular nationalism does not seek to banish, dismantle, or privatize religion; in fact, India's secular model explicitly recognizes religion.[23] Supporters of the country's distinct approach argue that neither outright separation nor a full embrace of the majority religion—Hinduism—would have been sustainable ventures in India's diverse, democratic polity. Given India's stunning religious and cultural diversity, granting preferential treatment to Hinduism would have come at the cost of ensuring India's syncretic traditions. Taking into account the context of India's birth amid the partition of the subcontinent (into India and Pakistan), appeals to separatism, and the threat of foreign meddling, a secular approach helped keep a disparate polity together at a time when the country was under great stress. At the same time, proponents of India's brand of secularism also maintain that the constitution had to give powers to the state to remedy inequalities and oppressive social practices that emerged out of certain religious traditions.

Homegrown critics of the Indian variant of secularism take issue with its interventionist qualities, especially because the primary target of social reform—both in the constitution and in subsequent law—has been Hinduism. These critics question, for instance, why both Muslims and Christians have been allowed to follow their own personal law while the state undertook reforms of the Hindu civil code shortly after the country gained independence.

Hindu Nationalism

The Hindu nationalist vision of Indian democracy differs markedly from its secular counterpart. It begins with the notion that secular nationalism is a fraudulent foreign imposition, perpetrated by elites associated with the Congress Party at the time of independence, an imposition that obscures India's true Hindu identity and associated cultural sensibilities.[24] Proponents of Hindu nationalism believe that Hinduism—not the precarious balancing of all ethnic and religious communities residing in India—is the ultimate source of the country's identity.

According to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the writer and political activist whose writings are considered foundational texts by many ardent Hindu nationalists, the Indian nation is at its core a Hindu nation. A Hindu, in turn, is anyone who regards sovereign Indian territory as both her fatherland (*pitribhumi*) as well as holy land (*punyabhoomi)*. Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists fulfill both criteria, while Christians, Jews, Parsis, and Muslims do not since members of these religious groups do not regard India as their true holy land. In the eyes of Hindu nationalists, India's Hindu identity is important on its own terms and also because it has the potential to foster the kind of coherent national community needed for both social stability and global recognition.[25]

To be fair, Hindu nationalists are far from a monolithic group. There is a great variety of debate about the practical implications of Hindu nationalist ideology. According to political scientist Kanchan Chandra, there are at least four distinct schools of thought.[26] On the most moderate end of the spectrum are those who believe that Hinduism, by virtue of being the largest and oldest of India's religious groups, should essentially occupy the role of first among equals. According to this viewpoint, Hinduism in India is akin to Christianity in the United States: it should not necessarily receive official recognition, but it should instead be accorded cultural superiority (in the same way that Christian holidays in the United States are widely recognized and celebrated while those associated with other religious traditions are not).

While this variant violates the Nehruvian secular ideals of maintaining principled distance from any and all religions, it is more accommodating than the second variant of Hindu majoritarianism. This approach

would give Hindus legal superiority, effectively making non-Hindus second-class citizens. While non-Hindus would still have access to all of the guarantees provided under the Indian Constitution, they would have to accept the state's endorsement of preferential treatment for Hindus.

According to the third and more strident variant, India is a Hindu nation that is the exclusive domain of the Hindu people. Non-Hindus would be forced to assimilate in ways that honored Hindu cultural customs to the detriment and, eventually, the dissolution of their own traditions.[27] The fourth and final manifestation of Hindu nationalism, which enjoys very little currency today, posits that India should be made a Hindu theocracy guided by officially designated religious leaders. Although certain elements of the Sangh Parivar, such as some members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), also known as the World Hindu Council, may endorse this outcome, it finds almost no place in the political mainstream. (The Sangh Parivar is the broader family of Hindu nationalist organizations of which the BJP is a political affiliate, while the VHP is an ecclesiastical organization dedicated to the spiritual consolidation of Hindu society.)

The practical result of these four formulations runs the gamut from a culturally pro-Hindu polity to outright theocracy. But what is common to all of them is the belief that India is fundamentally a Hindu *rashtra* (nation). The territory universally recognized as modern India, they argue, is inextricably linked to an ancient religious and cultural Hindu tradition that deserves pride of place above all other traditions found within India's present borders. The conflation of religion and culture, some scholars have argued, is intentional: the two cannot be separated according to most expositions of Hindu nationalist ideology. This mentality is at odds with the secularist approach, which views religion and culture as distinct concepts.[28]

THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S POLITICAL HINDUTVA

Although popular discussions of Hindu nationalism in the political domain often focus on the efforts of the BJP, the Hindutva movement has a long lineage that can be traced back hundreds of years. Although it has evolved considerably over time, and while it remains contested terrain given the diversity of views that individuals and groups within the movement hold, its roots date back to the nineteenth century.

Origins

The political manifestation of Hindutva dates back to Hindu reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj (1828) and the Arya Samaj (1875). These groups were concerned with the growing influence of Christianity and Islam on the subcontinent and worried that Hinduism, without undertaking significant reforms, would gradually be overtaken. These Hindu reform movements harkened back to a Vedic golden age and sought to revive this era of cultural greatness. To do so, they executed a dual strategy of stigmatization and emulation.[29] To make Hinduism more orderly and organizationally robust, the leaders of the Hindu social reform movements used Muslim and Christian encroachment to prop up the bugbear of a dangerous "other," which increased the perceived vulnerability of Hindus and provided a useful motivational threat. At the same time, these movements sought to reform Hinduism along modern lines by addressing issues such as the inequitable caste system, the maltreatment of women, idolatry, and polytheism. These reforms, it was believed, would help provide a bulwark against external challenges by modernizing Hinduism without sacrificing its fundamental religious tenets.

Eventually, these reform movements transitioned into pro-Hindu interest groups that exerted pressure on the Congress Party from within. While the more moderate faction continued working to influence the Congress Party's ideological direction, those holding more

extreme views grew impatient with the party. Leaders of this strident faction went on to found the Hindu Mahasabha in 1914, initially as a pressure group within the Congress Party and later as a separate political entity. India's emerging pro-Hindu voices grew alarmed at the manner in which the British Raj seemed to be appeasing Indian Muslims through various concessions such as the creation of separate Muslim electorates in India's provinces. While the group initially targeted its criticism at the British, India's Muslim community increasingly found itself in the crosshairs, especially as calls for the partition of India grew in frequency and intensity.

The Crucible of Hindu Nationalism

Hindu nationalism, as it is recognized today, is typically traced back to the 1920s, when Savarkar began to crystallize his views on the importance of achieving congruence between India's territorial and cultural/religious boundaries on the model of the European nation-state.[30] Savarkar understood Hindutva to be a political community that was united by geography, racial connection, and a shared culture. As Hansen notes, Savarkar's maxim of "Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan" essentially mimicked European-style nationalism based on religious identity, common language, and racial unity.[31] Loyalty to the nation—in this case, the Hindu nation—was paramount in his conception of Indian nationalism.[32]

A critical milestone occurred in 1925 when Keshav Baliram Hedgewar formed the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The organization began as an offshoot of the Mahasabha but soon developed its own independent identity. Among Hindu nationalists, opinions differed over the best way of revitalizing Hinduism. Hedgewar formed the RSS as a cultural, rather than political, body with the sole purpose of strengthening Hindu society by building civic character, unifying Hindus divided by caste, and enhancing their physical strength through training and exercises. In short, the RSS was established as a bottom-up vehicle for fortifying Hindu society.

Postindependence

The RSS's abstention from politics was short-lived. Shortly after India secured independence, the catalyst that prompted this shift was the drafting of a series of Hindu code bills that aimed to reform Hindu personal laws governing issues ranging from marriage to property rights. Hindu groups, led by the RSS and the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), the political party that was the precursor of the BJP, were vehemently opposed to the state's interference in matters of religious faith, especially given the government's inaction when it came to the personal laws of Islam and other faiths.

For much of its existence, the BJS was a minor electoral player—especially when compared to the dominant Congress Party—that struggled to connect with Indian voters on a pan-national basis. While the BJS's electoral reach may have been limited during the 1950s and 1960s, the Hindutva movement nevertheless enjoyed an expanding reach through the establishment of new Sangh Parivar affiliates such as the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a right-wing student organization; the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), a trade union; and the VHP.

The twenty-one-month period of emergency rule instituted by Indira Gandhi in 1975, in the wake of mass protests against Gandhi and Congress Party rule, was a critical turning point. Many key opposition actors, including leading figures affiliated with the Hindu right, were imprisoned or persecuted during this dark period in Indian history. When Gandhi relented and announced the resumption of elections in 1977, a coalition of opposition parties known as the Janata alliance—which included the BJS as a core member—were swept into power. It was the first time in India's post-1947 history that a non-Congress group of parties held the reins of power in New Delhi.

From the BJS to the BJP

Within two years, the Janata experiment collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions. The opportunistic

alliance, whose members were united in their distaste for the Congress Party but divided on matters of leadership and policy, was plagued by factionalism from the start. In particular, top Janata leaders unsuccessfully sought to compel BJS members to break their intimate ties with the RSS. Although the coalition was a failure, this brief stint in power nonetheless gave BJS leaders their first taste of governing. In 1980, the BJS morphed into the BJP under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Electorally, the BJP initially struggled to make much of an impression, winning just two seats in the 1984 general elections. The party was internally divided over whether it should adopt a more militant stance or moderate its views to cater to disaffected Congress Party voters. At first, the party adopted the latter posture, promising a return to "Gandhian socialism" and "positive secularism" (to highlight the contrast with what it called the Congress Party's "pseudo-secularism").[33] Notably, the word "Hindu" did not even appear in the party's constitution at this time.[34] Disenchanted with the BJP's incremental approach, the Sangh kept the party at arm's length, investing its own resources in more radical efforts to rekindle the fires of ethnoreligious nationalism.[35]

The approaches of the two entities would soon converge, however. The Congress Party's dalliance with religion and its willingness to intervene in disputes within and between religious communities created new opportunities for the BJP. The latter party soon moved away from its initial moderate stance toward a more purposive platform of Hindu identity-building that could exploit a growing sense of Hindu vulnerability.[36] The continuing decay of the Congress Party's organizational viability and the growing fragmentation of the Indian political system more generally induced the BJP to continue pursuing these efforts. The dawn of the coalition era meant that the BJP continually oscillated between more militant and moderate stances, depending on prevailing political conditions.[37]

A critical development in the 1990s was the ramping up of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement to reclaim the

"The Congress Party's dalliance with religion and its willingness to intervene in disputes within and between religious communities created new opportunities for the BJP."

place where the Muslim holy site, the Babri Masjid, stood in Ayodhya to make way for the construction of a *mandir* (temple) marking the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram. In 1990, the BJP president at the time, Lal Krishna Advani, led a monthlong *yatra* (pilgrimage) intended to further stoke the Hindu majoritarian agitation surrounding the Ram mandir issue, which had been instigated by the Sangh. The *yatra* led to a groundswell of support in favor of the Hindu nationalist cause but also trigged a deadly set of religious riots across the country.[38] In 1992, a roving mob of *kar sevaks* (religious volunteers) stormed the contested site and razed the Babri Masjid to the ground.

This sustained campaign of ethnoreligious mobilization by the Sangh and its many affiliates paid rich political dividends for the BJP, which saw its political footprint spread. The conflict over the mandir was just one of the many seismic events remaking India's political landscape in the 1990s. Market reforms, instituted by the Congress-led government in 1991, and the controversial Mandal Commission—which extended the web of quotas for government posts and seats in educational institutions to the country's Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—combined with the Ram temple agitation to fuel Hindu majoritarian political anxieties and create a disjuncture between democratic mobilization and democratic governance.[39]

In the late 1990s, the BJP finally catapulted to power in New Delhi. The party's first two forays under prime minister Vajpayee, however, were atop rickety, short-lived coalitions—which lasted just thirteen days (in

1996) and later thirteen months (1998–1999). But, in 1999, Vajpayee again became prime minister, this time commanding a more stable coalition government that allowed him to complete a full term in office. Hindutva certainly did not disappear, but the coalition arrangement compelled the BJP to deemphasize many controversial social issues that might raise the hackles of its friends and partners. Once in power, therefore, the BJP found it was "no longer in their interest to stoke communal fires."[40]

That is not to say that Hindu majoritarianism disappeared from India's political agenda entirely. Gujarat, for instance, became a flashpoint for communal tensions as Hindu-Muslim riots engulfed parts of the state under the watch of then chief minister Modi. The carnage became a blemish on Modi's record that later took more than a decade to overcome in the public eye, and Vajpayee at one time resolved to relieve Modi of his duties before reversing course. At the country's political center, however, Vajpayee's own emphasis was on economic reforms. These liberalizing reforms paid off handsomely for the Indian economy but less so for the prime minister and his party's political prospects. In the 2004 general election, the BJP unexpectedly lost power, paving the way for a decade of renewed Congress Party rule in New Delhi.

The 2014 Election

At the close of that decade under the Congress-led government overseen by former prime minister Manmohan Singh, India's 2014 election served as a watershed moment for the Hindutva movement. Between 2004 and 2014, the BJP occupied the opposition benches, prompting some supporters to speak openly of the party's permanent opposition status. Given the high stakes and the deep reservoir of support for Modi among the Sangh's rank and file, the RSS was mobilized on behalf of the BJP's 2014 campaign in a manner that had not been seen since 1977, when the Janata coalition routed the Indira Gandhi–led Congress government in the wake of the Emergency.[41]

The 2014 electoral verdict represented a breakthrough for the BJP and the broader Hindutva ecosystem, the likes of which many insiders had doubted was possible.[42] For starters, the BJP emerged as a significant player in new parts of the country—such as northeastern India and in Jammu and Kashmir—in a way that granted the party a pan-Indian character. Second, although the BJP only gained 31 percent of the vote, this was its highest ever vote share since the party's inception in 1980.[43] In the 1998 general elections, the BJP claimed 25 percent of the vote. After that, its vote share had steadily declined, slumping to 19 percent in 2009. The 2014 results not only reversed this decline but also marked the Congress Party's worst performance in history: the party claimed just forty-four seats in the parliament off of 19 percent of the vote. While it is true that the BJP's victory was concentrated in a small number of states—75 percent of its parliamentary tally came from just eight states—it is also true that it efficiently converted votes into seats.[44]

Third, the BJP constructed a broad-ranging social coalition in 2014 that moved beyond the party's traditional upper caste voter base. This approach had the added benefit of bolstering the Sangh's efforts to reach out to new constituencies across the country. To be clear, the party had made serious efforts to appeal to lower and backward castes for decades, including by incorporating them into the Sangh's provision of social services, which emphasized welfare over ideology.[45] What Modi did was use his own charisma, vision, and personal biography (including his status as an OBC) to translate these connections into votes like never before.

Fourth, the presidential nature of the 2014 election and the popular mandate in support of Modi as a candidate gave the BJP and its allies in the Hindu nationalist movement a unique opportunity to shape policies in a way that previous BJP leaders at the state and national levels simply lacked.

It is true that the 2014 campaign was not primary fought on issues at the center of the Hindutva

agenda.[46] In the national theater of politics, the BJP's campaign focused largely on issues of development, anticorruption, and good governance. The BJP made this strategic calculation to appeal broadly to Indian voters and help the party transcend its historically narrow base. Given Modi's bona fides within Hindu nationalist circles, there was no reason to overly tout his Hindutva credentials. However, that certainly does not mean that Hindu nationalist themes were absent from the campaign trail; on the contrary, these messages were deployed in a targeted manner in contexts and geographies where the BJP believed it could benefit from using them. Modi himself routinely attacked the Congress Party for pandering to Muslims by promising them special treatment, and he often embraced Hindu symbols and personalities to extract maximum political mileage.[47]

In parts of Uttar Pradesh, especially in western areas around Muzaffarnagar that had witnessed ethnic violence between Hindus and Muslims in 2013, the BJP did not shy away from communally polarizing rhetoric. Similarly, in the border state of Assam, the party used the sensitive issue of Bangladeshi migration as a wedge to shore up its support. At the same time, it is also true, as Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle have pointed out, that Modi skillfully made economic development a central element of the BJP's Hindutva approach. According to Modi's pitch, a strong India requires a dynamic economy that can provide ample economic opportunities for ordinary Indians, as a way of cementing both social stability and a more muscular approach abroad. This emphasis on the economy also opened the door to new constituencies who may not have been attracted to a purely majoritarian BJP approach.[48]

WHY INDIAN RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM MATTERS

Despite the long dalliance between religion and politics in India, now is a key moment in the country's

"The BJP espouses a distinct worldview that intrinsically favors one religious community—Hindus—over all others."

contemporary history that is worthy of deeper scrutiny for several reasons.

First, while many political parties in India invoke religious symbols for political purposes, the BJP espouses a distinct worldview that intrinsically favors one religious community—Hindus—over all others. While Hindus comprise 80 percent of India's population, the country is home to significant numbers of religious minorities, not least more than 175 million Muslims.[49] This makes India home to the world's second-largest Muslim population following Indonesia.[50]

Some scholars have argued that Hindu nationalism lends itself to populist discourse to the extent that it places a "high value on the general will of the Hindu community, and implied that existing institutions, including those of the state, were not expressions of that will and therefore lacked legitimacy."[51] With its twin emphasis on Hindu nationalism and a "new developmentalism," the BJP has saturated the country's ideological space at a time when the Congress Party's legacy of secular nationalism has fallen out of favor due to an accumulation of largely self-inflicted injuries.[52]

Second, the BJP's 2014 electoral victory was a watershed moment in India's post-1947 history. For the first time in three decades, a single party earned an outright majority in the lower house of India's parliament (the Lok Sabha). It was the first time since independence that a party other than the Congress Party had achieved such a decisive mandate. Since then, the BJP has methodically expanded its footprint across the country. In addition to running the central government in New Delhi, the party and its allies head governments in seventeen of India's twenty-nine

states, including in regions outside of its traditional stronghold of north-central India. To put this number in perspective, the BJP controlled just five states as recently as 2014.[53] While India previously witnessed a rise in Hindu nationalist fervor in the 1990s—on the backs of which the BJP first came to power in New Delhi between 1998 and 2004—the party's electoral fortunes plummeted thereafter. Furthermore, the party then never before enjoyed the popularity or reach that it does today.

The BJP's rejuvenation cannot be separated from a third new feature—the unique stature of Modi himself. Proponents and detractors alike admit that the BJP's 2014 victory was in large measure a result of the widespread popularity of its prime ministerial candidate. Within the confines of India's parliamentary system, Modi managed to make the contest a presidential one in which his leadership and track record as the former chief minister of Gujarat (a position he held for more than a dozen years) was the defining feature of his party's campaign. Exploiting an economic downturn between 2012 and 2014—which was compounded by allegations of grand corruption against the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and a pervasive sense of policy paralysis—and touting a charismatic new leader in Modi, the BJP soared to new heights. Whereas Indian national elections had typically retained a strong federal character, especially over the past quarter-century, Modi's popularity helped create a pan-Indian support base for the party for the first time.[54]

Since coming to power, Modi has remade the party in his image—with the assistance of his longtime aide and handpicked choice for BJP party president, Amit Shah. Modi and Shah quickly moved to cement their hold over the party apparatus by marginalizing any alternative power centers. Modi's emergence and the centralization of his authority over the party renders this iteration of the BJP—what can be referred to as BJP 2.0—quite distinct from its previous incarnation (BJP 1.0), which was led by the tandem of former prime minister Vajpayee and veteran lawmaker Advani, and which operated under a more collegial, decentralized framework.[55]

Fourth, Modi's relationship with the Sangh Parivar defies easy characterization. On the one hand, Modi dedicated many of his formative years to the Hindu nationalist cause. At twenty-one years old, Modi joined the ranks of the RSS, the ideological fountainhead of the Hindu nationalist movement in India and the parent organization of the BJP, as a *pracharak* (campaigner). Modi spent decades working up the RSS ranks before transitioning to the BJP, as senior RSS members often do, to take up partisan political organizing. While the RSS and the BJP are legally separate entities, they share an especially close form of collaboration under the present dispensation. Many high-ranking ministers cut their teeth in the service of the RSS or other entities linked to the Sangh Parivar. In addition, there are regularly scheduled coordination meetings in which BJP and RSS officials meet to discuss policy issues of the day.[56]

On the other hand, many other actors within the Sangh bristle at the outsize leadership of Modi. As Christophe Jaffrelot has argued, the Sangh has traditionally given priority to institutional considerations over personal equations; its collectivist ethos and beliefs militate against a single charismatic leader placing himself over the organization.[57] Furthermore, Modi's ascendance within the party compelled many individuals to join the party who had no previous association with the RSS or the Sangh Parivar, a development that raises questions about the latter's enduring influence.[58] Those who have previously argued that the BJP 2.0 and the RSS would essentially be two sides of the same coin oversimplify the nuanced relationship between the two, which confounds easy predictions about the influence of the latter on the former.

Finally, as two veteran chroniclers of the RSS have noted, the Hindu right wing is now part of India's political mainstream.[59] In previous periods in the

country's postindependence history, the Sangh Parivar has often been a pariah. Since 1947, the Indian government has banned the RSS on three separate occasions for allegedly fomenting extremist sentiments and violating constitutional principles. After years of mobilizing against a political establishment that the Sangh Parivar accused of being inadequately attuned to the desires of India's majority Hindu community, the Hindu nationalist outfit now *is* the establishment. Its affiliates, which officially number thirty-six (and informally dozens more), have grown in both size and scope, addressing issues from labor rights to women's empowerment and the uplifting of India's tribal community.[60] Thanks to the BJP's expanding political geography, the Sangh has a seat at the highest policymaking tables in the country, exerting both a direct and indirect influence on day-to-day governance. The Hindu right's unique combination of state *and* nonstate power grants it unique powers to shape India's political discourse.

INDIA'S RECEDING SECULAR TRADITION

As previously mentioned, one animating factor behind the BJP's 2014 victory and the ideological ascendance of Hindu majoritarianism has been the weakened state of secularism in contemporary India. The BJP has long advanced the notion that the Congress Party and other so-called secular parties have engaged in pseudo-secularism rather than genuine secularism. In other words, they allege that secular parties have adopted a holier-than-thou approach as if they are above religious considerations. But, in practice, they have cynically engaged in religious pandering—especially with regard to India's Muslims—to shore up their political base. Many liberal voices openly agree with this assessment: this state of affairs does not discredit secularism *per se* as much as it does the way in which secularism has been employed by opportunistic parties. For instance, Varshney argues that India's secular politicians stand guilty of engaging in two kinds of behavior he characterizes as "secular arrogance" and "secular ignorance."[61]

Secular arrogance describes the notion that political power can be used either to co-opt or to marginalize religious voices. The most evocative example of this is Indira Gandhi's dangerous efforts to woo Sikh extremists in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To defeat the popular Akali Dal in Punjab, a political party largely comprised of moderate Sikhs, she accommodated Sikh religious extremists, such as the fundamentalist preacher Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. When Gandhi lost control of Bhindranwale and his Sikh militants, she ordered the Indian Army to invade the Golden Temple, the Sikhs' holiest site, where they resided. The denouement of this debacle was the eventual assassination of Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, which triggered bloody anti-Sikh pogroms across Delhi in which several prominent Congress politicians were implicated. In another example of secular arrogance, Indira Gandhi, in the lead up to the 1983 Jammu and Kashmir assembly elections, stoked Hindu voters' fears over a resettlement bill that promised former residents of the state who had moved to Pakistan the right to return and resettle. The strategy largely paid off as the Congress Party made big gains in the predominately Hindu Jammu region. However, the gambit ultimately proved costly as the cynical ploy helped sow further divisions between Hindus and Muslims in the troubled state.

Secular ignorance, on the other hand, refers to situations in which politicians can easily entangle themselves in religious debates even as they try to ensure an equal distance from all faiths. The textbook example here is the Shah Bano case. In 1985, the Indian Supreme Court ruled in favor of Shah Bano, a Muslim woman who contested her husband's divorce and sought alimony. Although Islamic personal law permitted the divorce, the court ruled that Indian civil law superseded sharia. Facing uproar from Indian Muslims, then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi passed a law through the parliament that effectively rewrote Indian civil law on Islamic divorce to comply with sharia. This

act prompted widespread outrage, which many have argued paved the way for Hindu mobilization over the Babri Masjid and its subsequent destruction.[62]

Whether secular-minded politicians have acted in certain instances out of selfish political interest or whether they have been genuine in trying to maintain a principled distance from all religions, the result has been a general souring of secularism's reputation in India. This perhaps explains why there has been such little talk of secularism by political parties and politicians in the run-up to the 2019 elections. Fearful of being labelled minority appeasers and cognizant of the BJP's pitch that it is the only party that represents the Hindu majority, leading secular parties like the Congress have instead pivoted to brandishing their own Hindu credentials to blunt the BJP's appeal.

Many within the Congress Party contend that Hinduism is not the same as Hindutva; the Congress has no issue with the former: it is the latter that represents a threat to Indian democracy. As Congress member of parliament Shashi Tharoor has posited, Hinduism is fully compatible with liberalism as well as the protection of minorities; Hindutva is opposed to both.[63] There are others who believe that the Congress Party is essentially engaging in a soft form of Hindutva itself and, in that way, ensuring that it remains subservient to the BJP. These critics worry that the traditionally secular party is essentially trying to beat the BJP at its own game, which will never work given the latter's Hindu majoritarian bona fides.[64] Furthermore, such critics fear that abandoning Nehruvian secularism essentially would legitimate the politicization of religion. While such a tact might make for good politics in the short run, it will eventually corrode the Congress Party's brand and identity.[65]

MODI'S BJP IN THE HALLS OF POWER

To help gauge how Hindu nationalism is reshaping Indian politics, it is instructive to examine how the BJP government has wielded power in both predictable and unexpected ways. The central challenge for a BJP government of any form is balancing its Hindutva agenda with promises of economic rejuvenation. Although many observers expected that a government led by Modi, a former RSS *pracharak*, would aggressively move to implement pro-Hindu policies, the reality has been far more complicated. For starters, while the Modi government has expanded its ties with the RSS, many Sangh leaders also view this BJP 2.0 government with a skeptical eye. Despite Modi's long association with the RSS, the two often clashed during his tenure as Gujarat chief minister.[66] Many within the Sangh bristle at Modi's outsize personality, his charismatic persona, and the way he has rebranded the party around himself. This is not a uniform view within the Sangh, by any stretch; indeed, the conventional wisdom holds that Modi was, and remains, widely popular with the rank-and-file members of the Sangh Parivar's affiliates.

Beyond Modi's approach as a leader, elements of the Sangh also object to the incremental approach BJP 2.0 has taken with respect to the traditional Hindutva agenda. On the core social issues that have dominated the BJP's cultural agenda for decades—the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, the repeal of Article 370 (which grants Jammu and Kashmir special autonomous status), and the institution of a new uniform civil code—the Modi government has not taken bold action. It is true that the subject of the Ram temple is being whipped up as the 2019 general elections approach, with the Sangh urging the government to use its executive powers to create new facts on the ground as the subject remains under litigation before the Supreme Court. However, in a January 2018 interview, Modi categorically ruled out intervention prior to a judicial resolution, stating, "Let the judicial process be over. After the judicial process is over, whatever be our responsibility as government, we are ready to make all efforts."[67]

Yet the central government in New Delhi has created space for majoritarianism to flourish.[68] For instance,

in BJP-ruled states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, the state governments have moved to rewrite history textbooks to downplay Islamic contributions to Indian history and culture.[69] Textbooks in the state of Maharashtra scrapped an entire chapter on the Mughal Empire, an Islamic regime that dominated much of the subcontinent for three centuries prior to the British Empire's formal takeover.[70] After coming to power in the states of Haryana and Maharashtra, BJP governments there moved to strengthen laws on the books banning cow slaughter. In Maharashtra, where cow slaughter was already banned, the new law banned both the sale and possession of beef. The so-called beef ban carried jail time and financial penalties for would-be violators. In addition, the cow protection movement has pursued extrajudicial methods of enforcing its will, leading to a spike in vigilante justice, lynchings, and mob violence.[71]

Perhaps the most visible example of this majoritarian trend at the subnational level is the selection of Yogi Adityanath as the BJP's chief minister in Uttar Pradesh after the party obtained a three-fourths majority in the state assembly in 2017. Home to more than 200 million residents—not to mention Ayodhya and the disputed Babri Masjid site—Uttar Pradesh is also the metaphorical heart of the Hindi heartland and a state with a well-earned reputation of making or breaking general elections.[72] Having won the election on the back of Modi's popularity and unique standing, the party (with the assent of the prime minister) named Adityanath its choice for chief minister. Adityanath, a sitting BJP member of parliament, enjoys a reputation as a firebrand Hindu cleric who espouses an aggressive brand of majoritarianism that makes even some devout Hindus blush. In years past, Adityanath has championed the cause of love jihad—a conspiracy theory that alleges that bands of Muslim men target Hindu women for the purposes of converting them to Islam.[73] He is also closely linked to the controversial *ghar wapsi* (literally, homecoming) movement, which aims to convert minorities to Hinduism on the presumption that they were all originally Hindus who had been manipulated into abandoning the faith.[74] After coming to power, Adityanath ordered the police to institute what were dubbed anti-Romeo squads, ostensibly to prevent youths from harassing women, but these outfits often have been employed as a kind of moral police.[75] Adityanath has also devoted his energies to renaming cities and administrative units that refer back to their Islamic heritage—whether it be Allahabad (Prayagraj) or Faizabad (Ayodhya).[76] The Modi government's five years in office, therefore, suggest a contradictory assessment. Although the party has refrained from using its perch in New Delhi to forcefully promote some of the most controversial elements of the BJP's traditional social agenda, it has nonetheless given top cover for a range of Hindutva initiatives at the state and substate level.

HOW DURABLE IS THE BJP'S IDEOLOGICAL HEGEMONY?

After five years in power, the BJP has accomplished an ambitious feat: it has cemented its role as a hegemonic political power. According to Suhas Palshikar, the BJP's newfound hegemony rests on two pillars: elections and ideology.

In electoral terms, the BJP has become the central pole around which politics in India revolves.[77] Its 2014 victory, coupled with an impressive string of state election triumphs and an expansion of the party's social base, has transformed the party from merely competitive to markedly dominant. Like the Congress Party before it, the BJP's present position has a system-defining quality. Both state and national elections are regularly fought in reaction to the BJP (either in favor or in opposition). As 2019's general election approaches, opposition parties are hastily engineering a common anti-BJP front. These alliances contain little substantive content other than a shared desire to halt the BJP's electoral juggernaut.

Second and just as importantly, the BJP has also managed to exert its dominance ideologically.[78] On the one hand, the BJP has succeeded in legitimating what scholars John Harriss, Craig Jeffrey, and Stuart Corbridge call "banal Hindutva," or the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist views that were once thought to be outside the political norm but today are viewed as routine elements of everyday Indian politics.[79] The BJP's ascendance has had a qualitative impact on secular parties to the extent that a full-throated embrace of secularism is no longer seen as politically advantageous.

On the other hand, the BJP has also been intentional about the subtle conflation between nationalism and Hindutva. A hallmark of the first five years of BJP 2.0 has been a nationalistic call to arms. This rallying cry has infused the party's economic program and its objective to build a "New India," its landmark development schemes (which call for personal sacrifice on behalf of the nation), and the party's foreign policy ambitions. Modi's principal contribution to Indian foreign policy has been to infuse it with the new aim of recapturing India's civilizational greatness through its bilateral and multilateral arrangements abroad. This recent pivot to nationalism allows the BJP to recruit new members without resorting to polarizing pro-Hindu rhetoric that might upset swing voters, members of the middle class, or business interests. However, Palshikar has argued that this tactic is effectively a bait-and-switch: once the party creates a mood of nationalist fervor, "it is not very difficult to implicitly suggest that being a nationalist is equivalent to being a Hindu and vice versa."[80]

If the opposition manages to emerge victorious in 2019, it will also have to reckon with secularism's failing brand. One electoral victory alone cannot be taken as evidence of a resurgence of secularism. And there also is likely to be deliberation within the Hindu nationalist movement about its future. For decades, there has been a debate about the definition of who is a Hindu. For instance, can the identity marker encompass Christians, Muslims, and other minorities, as those who favor a broad cultural definition have argued, or must the definition be more narrowly cast in religious terms?[81] In recent months, current and former RSS functionaries have openly jousted in the country's op-ed pages as to whether the RSS is ripe for *glasnost* (openness) and must execute a *perestroika* (restructuring).[82] The 2019 election will not resolve the war between secular and Hindu nationalism in India. But it will undoubtedly be a pivotal battle.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR INDIA'S POLITICAL FUTURE

Given the ongoing duel between secularism and Hindu majoritarianism in Indian politics, it is important to assess the role that Hindu nationalism is playing in India's democracy under the political leadership of the BJP. This evaluation comes at an opportune moment, as India is on the cusp of its seventeenth general election; voting will begin in April 2019 and conclude in late May. This election, which will be the largest democratic exercise on record and in which nearly 900 million voters will be eligible to cast ballots, will shape the most pressing domestic debates in India.[83] What once appeared likely to be a cakewalk for the Modi-led BJP government has turned into a fierce contest. Thanks to lackluster job creation, rural economic anxiety, a newly energized opposition, and India's general anti-incumbency trends, Modi's reelection is no longer assured.[84]

For India's 1.3 billion citizens, there is a great deal at stake in this election. The BJP was voted into office in 2014, first and foremost, on a platform that revolved around reviving the economy. At the time of writing, India remains the fastest-growing major economy in the world.[85] But, during the government's tenure, growth has been uneven and subject to multiple shocks, both exogenous (such as volatile crude oil prices and the ongoing trade war between the United States and China) and endogenous (such as the government's questionable 2016 demonetization gambit and the patchy rollout of a nationwide goods and services tax). Furthermore, there is a widespread perception among

voters that the BJP government has not lived up to its lofty promises to rejuvenate India's moribund private investment cycle, boost farmer incomes, or generate enough formal employment. In foreign policy terms, India has adopted a much more assertive eastward stance vis-à-vis China. Arguably, Prime Minister Modi is more in sync with the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy than any other major political leader in India today. However, if a non-BJP dispensation were to come to power after the next election, it is not obvious that the victors would necessarily share a similar strategic outlook.

Finally, this election will determine the contours of India's future as a secular republic that embraces pluralism and adheres to the founders' notion that India's unity is strengthened by its unparalleled diversity. Across the political landscape, religion and religious symbolism have become entrenched. There are right-wing Hindu nationalists who argue that India's future peace, prosperity, and stability can only be obtained under a *Ram rajya* (a harkening back to a mythical golden age under the Hindu Lord Ram); senior leaders associated with the country's leading opposition force—the Congress Party—have also embraced their Hindu faith to try to blunt the BJP's religious appeals. The competitive jousting over religion raises unsettling questions about India's long-term commitment to secularism.

It is unclear whether the BJP will lose the forthcoming election or succeed in maintaining control of the central government in New Delhi. While the conventional wisdom is that the BJP will once more form the central government—albeit without a single-party majority—the legacy of the BJP under Modi's leadership would not fade easily from the scene, even if that happened. Aside from the natural path dependency inherent in policymaking, some observers have argued that the ideological hegemony erected by the Modi-led BJP would remain relevant, even after an immediate electoral defeat, due to the degree to which it has penetrated society as well as the ideas that major political contenders have internalized.

"The competitive jousting over religion raises unsettling questions about India's long-term commitment to secularism."

The remaining chapters of this volume seek to answer a series of five questions that naturally arise from the ongoing political contest and competing national conceptions embraced by the Hindu nationalists of the BJP and the more secular-minded Congress Party.

First, what constitute the BJP 2.0's core ideological beliefs? Although scholars have often stated that Indian politics is devoid of ideas and is instead preoccupied with identity-based considerations, political scientist Rahul Verma argues that this conventional understanding is misguided. Politics in India is deeply ideological, but the axes of conflict depart from the traditional Western notion of a single left-right spectrum. Instead, Indian parties and voters can be sorted according to their views on two dimensions: the politics of statism and the politics of recognition. To this end, Verma examines the ideological basis of the BJP's mobilization and how the party has balanced its twin objectives—economic renewal and Hindu nationalism—over time. This balancing act is a precarious one: BJP voters who frown on state intervention, especially when it comes to social norms and individual liberties, do not necessarily endorse the party's majoritarian agenda, which seeks to use state power to enforce pro-Hindu social behavior (from the content of textbooks to eating habits). While a charismatic leader like Modi may succeed in keeping both groups within the tent, the party's internal contradictions pose a long-term challenge.

Second, what factors powered the BJP's one-in-a-generation electoral victory in 2014? While many observers had expected the BJP to emerge as the single-largest party, few anticipated the size of its mandate. Although the BJP earned only 31 percent of the nationwide vote (collectively, its National Democratic

Alliance garnered a 38.4 percent vote share), it won 282 seats (with its allies securing another 53 seats) out of the 543 on offer. Journalist Rukmini S. interrogates the available social science survey data to examine how the BJP constructed a winning coalition from an electorate that is deeply divided on caste and religious lines. Against the odds, the BJP was able to effectively construct a pan-Hindu vote in a relatively small number of states notwithstanding deep opposition from Muslims and other minority groups. However, she points out that the contest was a wave election uniquely driven by Modi's unmatched popularity. Beneath the surface, there are multiple contradictions within the BJP's caste and demographic coalition that pose a threat to the party's continued electoral success.

Third, what impact is the ascendance of Hindu nationalism having on secularism in India and the posture of secular parties? Although national secularism was a hallmark of the country's independence movement and the founding ideology of the Congress Party, it has fallen out of favor in recent years—due to external challenges (in the form of Hindu nationalism and the BJP) as well as self-inflicted wounds by politicians who have cynically manipulated religious divisions for short-term electoral gain. Some commentators have even suggested that "secularism is dead" in India today because it has been so badly tainted by charges of minority appeasement and opportunism.[86]

Veteran South Asia scholar Christophe Jaffrelot analyzes how secularism's changing fortunes are influencing the mobilization strategies of parties, the symbols of campaigning, and the Indian government's long-standing policy of maintaining a "principled distance" from religious groups.[87] While Congress Party leaders have publicly embraced their Hindu beliefs to a limited extent as a way of reclaiming Hinduism from BJP-led Hindutva circles, the preeminence of bread-and-butter economic matters in 2019 could actually shift political debates in India away from religion and toward more secular themes.[88] More difficult to predict is the trajectory of the judicial branch, argues Jaffrelot. While justices on India's Supreme Court have largely adhered to a secular worldview, their counterparts in the lower judiciary—including state high courts—have in recent years either inadvertently waded into sensitive religious matters or betrayed overt communal sentiments in their judgments.

Fourth, what relevance has Hindu nationalist ideology had for economic policymaking under the BJP 2.0? The party is often described as a right-wing body, and many observers have interpreted this to mean that it is libertarian-leaning on economic policy. In fact, the ideological crosscurrents within the party and the Hindu nationalist movement are far more complex, argues economic analyst Gautam Mehta. Although many observers expected that the pro-business proclivities of the BJP government under Modi would clash with the more nationalist tendencies of the Sangh Parivar, there has been much greater convergence between the two than many once expected. The Sangh Parivar is not a monolithic entity; behind the scenes (and, on occasion, out in the open), there is an intense push-and-pull between a *swadeshi* (self-reliance) wing and a more market-friendly faction. The Sangh's changing social composition and the pragmatism of its current leadership, combined with the political economy–related pressures the BJP has faced, have led to a surprising overlap in thinking on some of the most crucial policy matters of the day, Mehta finds. Furthermore, the relationship between the Sangh and the BJP is not unidirectional, but circular; just as the Sangh has pressured the government to modify many of its economic policies, the BJP too has influenced the views of top Sangh leaders.

Finally, how has Hindu nationalism come to shape the BJP's foreign policy decisionmaking? International relations scholars Abhijnan Rej and Rahul Sagar trace the evolution of Hindu nationalist strategic thought through the decades and assess the degree to which the Modi government has adhered to its core principles. Like previous BJP prime minister Vajpayee, Modi has emphasized the acquisition of domestic capabilities and

the importance of bolstering India's image on the global stage. While Modi has worked tirelessly to strengthen India's diplomatic outreach abroad, Rej and Sagar argue that he has been notably less successful than his BJP predecessor at reforming the domestic economy and strengthening India's defense capacities. Where the BJP 2.0 under Modi has innovated is by infusing Indian foreign policy with an emphasis on civilizational values, reflected in initiatives from Buddhist diplomacy to efforts to use Hindu sociocultural terms to promote solidarity among developing economies in the lead-up to the Paris Climate Change Conference in 2015. While the intent of the BJP 2.0 is clear, Rej and Sagar argue that there is a danger that its domestic social agenda could undermine its stated foreign policy priorities, especially if Hindu majoritarianism weakens social stability and economic prosperity—undermining the very objectives of the party's stated foreign policy.

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CHAPTER 2

THE EMERGENCE, STAGNATION, AND ASCENDANCE OF THE BJP

RAHUL VERMA

INTRODUCTION

The role that ideas play in shaping the dynamics of India's party system and, by extension, underlying voter behavior, has been surprisingly overlooked by most scholarly accounts of contemporary Indian politics. This chapter explores the ideological crosscurrents that have led to the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a heavyweight on India's political stage by focusing on three key questions. First, how did the BJP become the sole voice of Hindu majoritarian politics? Second, given that parties operate within the competitive boundaries set by other political players, what limits and opportunities in the Indian party system shaped the rise of the BJP? Third, while the BJP has emerged as a dominant actor in Indian politics, what challenges does the party face in the short to medium run? This chapter investigates the rise of the BJP in the 1980s and 1990s, its brief stagnation thereafter, and its recent ascendance under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP's rise has been gradual and, in some ways, its victory in 2014 was a historical culmination of the battle over competing visions of Indian nationhood that has been waged for nearly the past two centuries.

Scholars have already presented detailed accounts of how the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS)—a party that was the precursor to the BJP, along with its ideological partners, namely the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates belonging to the Sangh Parivar—have used Hindu majoritarianism as a mobilizational plank in postindependence India.[89] Building on this history, it is noteworthy that, since the 1980s, the BJP has been the principal carrier for two, sometimes overlapping, groups of ideological conservatives: those who strenuously object to the politics of recognition and social classes who harbor deep misgivings about the prevailing politics of statism.[90] In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the BJP emerged as the single-largest party in the Lok Sabha, storming to power on the back of pro-Hindu majoritarian sympathies that were triggered by the divisive issue of building a Ram temple on the disputed site of a demolished mosque called the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. After ruling India from 1998 to 2004 under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the party was unseated by their archrival, the Congress Party from 2004 to 2014. The party's electoral struggles led many observers to opine that the BJP might have hit an electoral ceiling; indeed, one prominent

"The BJP's 2014 victory was driven largely by the consolidation of [the] ideological forces . . . that govern party competition in India—the politics of statism and the politics of recognition."

commentator penned a fatalistic column that mused whether the BJP was "A 'Dying' Party?"[91] Therefore, it came as a surprise to many political watchers—not least many within the BJP itself—that the party roared back to power in 2014 with Modi leading his colleagues to India's first single-party parliamentary majority in three decades. Since then, the party has managed to become the focal point of the entire Indian party system. Ultimately, the BJP's 2014 victory was driven largely by the consolidation of ideological forces on two axes that govern party competition in India—the politics of statism and the politics of recognition.

Going forward, the BJP has certain challenges to overcome. The party's ability to maintain its preeminent position in Indian politics requires that it deal with emerging cracks within its diverse coalition. For much of the twentieth century, support for Hindu majoritarianism and condemnation of preferential treatment for historically disadvantaged groups were a winning (and mutually reinforcing) political combination.

However, there are nascent indications that change is afoot, as the voter blocs that favor Hindutva sensibilities and reject efforts to redress historical identity-based inequities no longer overlap as neatly as they once did. A recent nationwide poll of Indian youth indicates that some urban educated youth may still be opposed to caste-based quotas but do not hold anti-Muslim views.[92] Party leaders appear to be making concerted efforts to balance this contradiction. Not only have they reached out to some Muslim groups, they are also trying to shift quota discourse from caste to class by announcing 10 percent reservations for the economically poor.[93]

Furthermore, the aversion India's upper classes have typically held toward statism appears to be shifting from social concerns to economic and material ones. Some of these contradictions have become apparent in the run-up to the 2019 elections. Economic issues related to employment, agrarian distress, and efficiency in public service delivery remain salient, despite national security concerns stemming from the aftermath of the Pulwama terrorist attack on Indian security forces in Jammu and Kashmir.

IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT IN INDIAN PARTY POLITICS

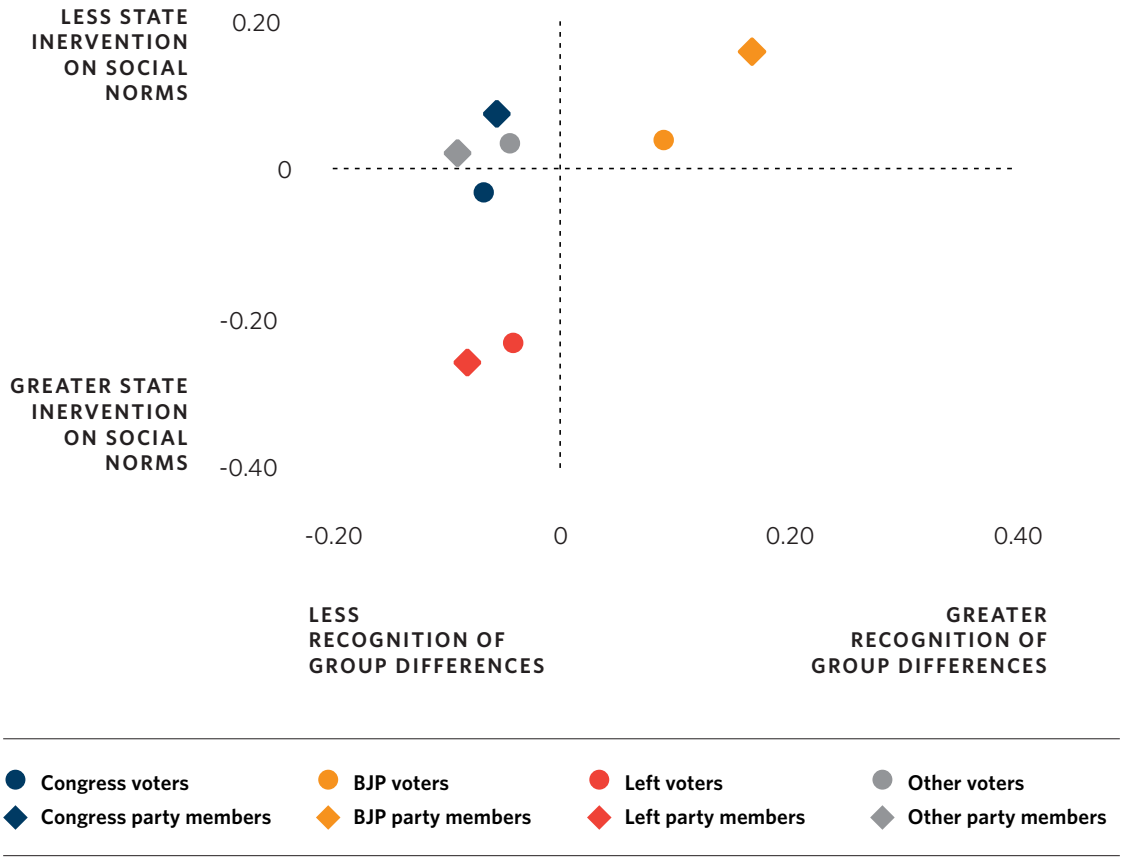
To make the case that particular ideological policy preferences are important for understanding Indian politics, it is necessary to first dispel with some conventional wisdom about how the country's political arena operates. The dominant view among leading scholars is that Indian politics is nonideological. This scholarly consensus has been based on the shared understanding that political parties of all stripes, unlike their counterparts in many long-standing democracies, differ very little on core economic principles.[94] But, contrary to this conventional wisdom on ideological conflict primarily focusing on distinctions of economic ideology—those who favor free markets on the right, and those who look for greater state intervention on the left—arguably has had limited resonance in India so far.[95] In reality, the process of state formation in India took place in very different circumstances from those that governed state formation in Western Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For that reason, debates about class conflict were less central to the formation of the Indian state.

In India, which is one of the most heterogeneous societies on the planet, the most essential political battles occur on fundamentally different lines. The first axis of conflict has to do with the politics of statism, or to what degree government actors should intervene to modulate societal norms or economic interactions on matters like marriage, inheritance,

and the redistribution of private property. The second axis centers on the politics of recognition, or if and in which ways the government should make allowances to redress historical inequities suffered by disadvantaged communities and safeguard minority communities from the excesses of Hindutva majoritarian impulses. India's political landscape is dominated by these dual concerns—government-directed attempts to reshape social customs and manage the economy, and state-led efforts to remedy the inequalities that exist between India's diverse array of ethnic groups.[96]

Based on national election-related surveys done by the Lokniti Program of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) from 1967 to 2014, it is evident that core backers of India's leading parties (the BJP, the Congress, the communist parties, and prominent regional parties) have empirically distinguishable views on how the state should weigh in on a range of economic issues and social practices as varied as marriage across caste or religious lines, inheritance, and property rights (see figure 1).[97] When it comes to the politics of recognition, those on the

FIGURE 1
Ideological Positions of Party Members and Voters in 2014



Source: Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study (NES) post-poll survey, 2014.
Note: This figure illustrates various parties' ideological positioning during the 2014 Lok Sabha election.

right wing of the political spectrum have generally resisted identity-based reservations and betrayed Hindu majoritarian sympathies. By contrast, the left-leaning (communist) parties and the centrist Congress have favored minority rights and quotas to accommodate marginalized communities.

Contestation over statism and recognition help explain the evolution of Indian party politics since the country was founded, including the Congress Party's waning political influence since those early years, the electoral growth of state-level parties in many parts of India, and the more recent ascent of the BJP. These changes in the party system can be attributed to the dilemmas faced by the Congress Party, which has sought to occupy the center on the politics of statism and the politics of recognition alike, and to the slow confluence and marshalling of the political forces that are skeptical of statism and recognition.

After dominating Indian politics in the immediate aftermath of independence in 1947, the Congress Party faced increasing competition from both sides of the ideological divide. To take back the political narrative, then Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi pivoted to the left of the political spectrum and enacted legal and regulatory changes that granted the state an enhanced role in directing both the economy and regulating social norms. Gandhi's pivot outraged many Congress leaders who resented the shift on ideological grounds, and they eventually departed from the Congress ecosystem.

In the 1980s, the party came under heavy pressure from caste-based movements and parties to use state power to recognize marginalized groups—namely, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), who had not benefited from quotas. The Congress Party's dithering on this question further fueled the rise of regional parties that favored greater state recognition as well as the BJP, which opposed the broadening of ethnic quotas. The Congress, therefore, was squeezed from both sides. The end result was the heightened prominence of regional parties, the electoral emergence of the right-of-center BJP, and the continued erosion of the Congress Party's influence.

THE JOURNEY FROM BJS TO BJP

India's evolution from a political system with a single dominant actor (the Congress Party) to a BJP-led dominant party system is marked by the right wing's gradual efforts to mount a formidable opposition and competing version of Indian nationhood has gone through four significant phases.

The Era of Congress Dominance (1952–1967)

After India secured independence in 1947, a fierce debate took place within the Congress Party over its policy outlook. Although a minority faction of the party was receptive to the Hindutva's social policy aims, their voices got marginalized by the emergence of Jawaharlal Nehru as the party's preeminent leader. One particular bone of contention between Hindu traditionalists and the secularists was a law known as the Hindu Code Bill, which sought to furnish "a unified system of law governing Hindu marriage."[98] While the Hindu traditionalist faction of the Congress strenuously opposed the measure, it was left without a voice after Vallabhbhai Patel, deputy prime minister and minister of home affairs, died in 1950. After his passing, no single figure in the traditionalist camp boasted as much broad political appeal as Nehru.

The Congress Party's reluctance under Nehru to make allowances for Hindu traditionalists helped motivate the Hindu right to politically organize outside of the Congress umbrella. In 1951, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, a former member of Nehru's cabinet, formally established the BJS as a Hindu nationalist alternative to the Congress secular establishment. With an assist from the RSS, Mukherjee struck out on his own after concluding that the Hindu Mahasabha and

the recently formed Ram Rajya Parishad (RRP) were both ill-suited to serve as the basis for a formidable Hindu nationalist political organ. In Mukherjee's view, both existing outfits were too rigid in their approach to accommodating social concerns and the political interests of non–upper caste Hindus. In its initial innings, the BJS was a relatively minor player. In 1952, the pro-Hindu BJS, Hindu Mahasabha, and the RRP collectively secured ten seats in parliament, earning a mere 6 percent of the nationwide vote.[99]

By 1967, however, the BJS (which later morphed into the BJP) had established itself as a significant political actor in its own right, claiming more than thirty seats in parliament and nearly 10 percent of the vote. In just fifteen years, it had siphoned off many of the Hindu Mahasabha's and RRP's voters.[100] Across the states of the Hindi heartland, the BJS took the stage as the Congress Party's chief foe, attacking it from the right. Despite the growth in the party's electoral base, there were limits to how far the party could grow. The tight-knit relationship between the BJS and the RSS constrained the party's capacity to galvanize widespread support from a diverse range of Indian social groups, in clear contrast to the broad appeal the Congress Party enjoyed across Hindu castes and minority religious communities.[101]

Aside from the Hindu parties, Congress faced another challenge on its right flank from a party opposed to its statist policies. In 1959, the Swatantra Party was formed to take "a decisive stand against government controls, taxation, and general economic policy, in the area of industry and agriculture respectively."[102] Just three years later, in 1962, the conservative Swatantra Party won close to 8 percent of the vote and quickly established itself as the third most numerous contingent in the lower house of parliament.[103] The opening chapter of party politics in India closed in 1967 when opposition forces surfaced on two of the centrist Congress Party's flanks. On the politics of recognition, the BJS opposed Congress's accommodations of identity-based recognition while the socialist parties demanded more of it, even as the Swatantra Party stood firmly opposed to the politics of statism and the communist parties mobilized in favor of it. Although the Congress Party saw its grip on power weaken at the state level, it remained dominant in the national political arena.

Mounting Opposition to the Congress in Various States (1967–1989)

Buffeted by opposition to her party's stances on both statism and recognition, the Indira Gandhi–led Congress Party decided to move in the direction of greater statism to keep its opponents at bay. Gandhi unveiled economic and social statist policies such as major amendments to the Hindu Marriage Act, and the political skirmish that ensued split the Congress Party in the late 1960s. The Congress's conservative wing revolted, left the party, and set up a new political front known as the Indian National Congress (Organization), or Congress (O).

The 1969 fragmentation of the Congress Party altered the political landscape for the party itself and opposition forces alike. The Congress's divisions helped clear several hurdles that had earlier prevented the BJS and the Swatantra Party from forming an electoral pact. As one political scientist observed, "Swatantra leaders were hesitant to ally with Jana Sangh because of its anti-Muslim image and Jana Sangh leaders had reservations about the unabashed economic conservatism of Swatantra. The Old Congress provided a secular link for Swatantra and a less conservative economic program in line with the growing populism in Jana Sangh. The inclusion of the Old Congress also allayed Swatantra fears of being absorbed by the highly disciplined Jana Sangh."[104]

To counteract the Congress, several leading opposition forces—including the BJS, Congress (O), the Swatantra Party, and some socialist groups—joined hands in an opportunistic alliance to challenge Indira Gandhi's rump Congress faction known formally as Congress (R). The combined opposition proved no match for Gandhi, whose popularity led the Congress (R) to a

historic electoral triumph in 1971: the party handily won a single-party majority (of 352 seats) in the Lok Sabha.[105]

Indira Gandhi's sweeping victory did not deter conservative opposition forces, who continued to work together to take on the Congress Party. The Emergency (1975–1977) and two years of Janata Party rule (1977–1979) fall under this chapter of Indian political history. The Janata Party was an amalgamation of several opposition parties united not by a common ideology, but rather by a shared distaste of the Congress Party. Its constituent members included the BJS, Congress (O), the Swatantra Party, various socialist groups, and the Bharatiya Kranti Dal. It did not take long for the coalition's contradictions to surface. On the one hand, the socialists moved to appoint a commission to offer specified conditions to help determine the allocation of reservations for the OBCs. On the opposite end of the spectrum, pro-Hindu members of the coalition wanted the government to take action on its pet priorities, such as a law to ban religious conversion. (Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion, and many Hindus in India fear their numbers will inevitably decline if Christians and Muslims are allowed to engage in religious conversions.) The ideological conflict within the Janata Party coalition led to its eventual disintegration and paved the way for the formation of the BJP in 1980. Although it took another decade for the BJP to emerge as a serious electoral player, this development was highly significant because it meant that a majority of right-leaning groups had converged under the BJP's umbrella.

The newly emergent BJP under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee pursued a moderate position, a decision that immediately provoked a response from the RSS and elements of the Sangh Parivar. Vajpayee's decision to chart a middle path was most likely based on a strategic calculation intended to retain supporters of the erstwhile Janata Party that had joined the BJP.[106] However, the RSS openly expressed its displeasure with the BJP's moderate turn. Instead of catering to disparate demands and risk diluting its core ideology, the RSS instead depended on the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and other Sangh affiliates to galvanize its Hindu base.[107] In fact, many observers have argued that the RSS failed to rally its cadres to the BJP cause in 1984.[108] The BJP performed poorly in these elections, which were held after the tragic demise of Indira Gandhi, winning just two seats in the Lok Sabha.[109]

After the historic victory of the Congress Party in the 1984 elections, two issues factored prominently in shaping the contours of emerging politics in northern India. The first was the Shah Bano controversy,[110] which opened up a political debate about whether India should adopt a uniform civil code that would apply to all religious groups (including Muslims, who have historically been allowed to retain the customs of sharia law). The second issue was the mobilization of Hindu voters dedicated to building a Ram temple on the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.[111] The BJP was initially skeptical about endorsing the Ram temple issue, concerned that an embrace of extremist politics might complicate its ability to attract coalition allies. However, it later decided to throw caution to the wind when its senior leadership sensed that the Ram temple agitation would offer a unique chance to consolidate Hindu votes.

The BJP Gains Ground Amid a Fragmented Party System (1989–2014)

Thanks to voter mobilization on these two issues and charges of pervasive corruption against the Congress government headed by prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, the 1989 elections presented the BJP with a promising opportunity to consolidate its electoral position. The party entered into pre-election arrangements with the National Front (a bloc of several state-level parties opposed to the Congress Party). The BJP earned just more than one-tenth of the vote, far less than the Congress share (40 percent). However, this was enough to bag eighty-five seats and provided the BJP with the heft to offer crucial support to prime minister V.P.

Singh (a former member of Rajiv Gandhi's cabinet) and the National Front government.[112]

The issue of reservations for historically marginalized castes again proved to be a sticking point. The V.P. Singh government's controversial choice to accept the Mandal Commission's findings on granting OBCs reservations for government jobs prompted BJP leader L.K. Advani to take to the road to undercut the fallout from the issue of OBC reservations and create pan-Hindu pressure to construct a Ram temple on the site of the Babri Masjid. When Advani was arrested in Bihar during the Yatra (the incumbent chief minister of Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav, represented V.P. Singh's party), the BJP withdrew support from the Singh government, eventually paving the way for the 1991 general elections. In these elections, the BJP went to the polls banking on the Ram temple agitation, although it combined this outreach to Hindus with advocacy of greater economic reforms.[113] The BJP managed to channel middle-class dissatisfaction by pushing for the government to be less involved in the economic sphere—a shift in Indian political discourse that the Congress also embraced at the time.[114]

Following this latest bout of agitation around the Ayodhya issue, the BJP "represented the twin (but often overlapping) constituencies of political Hindutva (or Hindu nationalism) and anti-Congressism."[115] Though the historic economic reforms introduced by the Congress government in 1991 limited the ability of the BJP to mobilize support on the grounds of economic statism, the party continued to grow with the help of a segment of the Indian population mobilized through the Ram temple agitation and opposition to the demand for Muslim reservations.[116] The party's rank and file also became more accommodating of a range of historically marginalized groups—including Dalits (formerly known as untouchables), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and OBCs.[117]

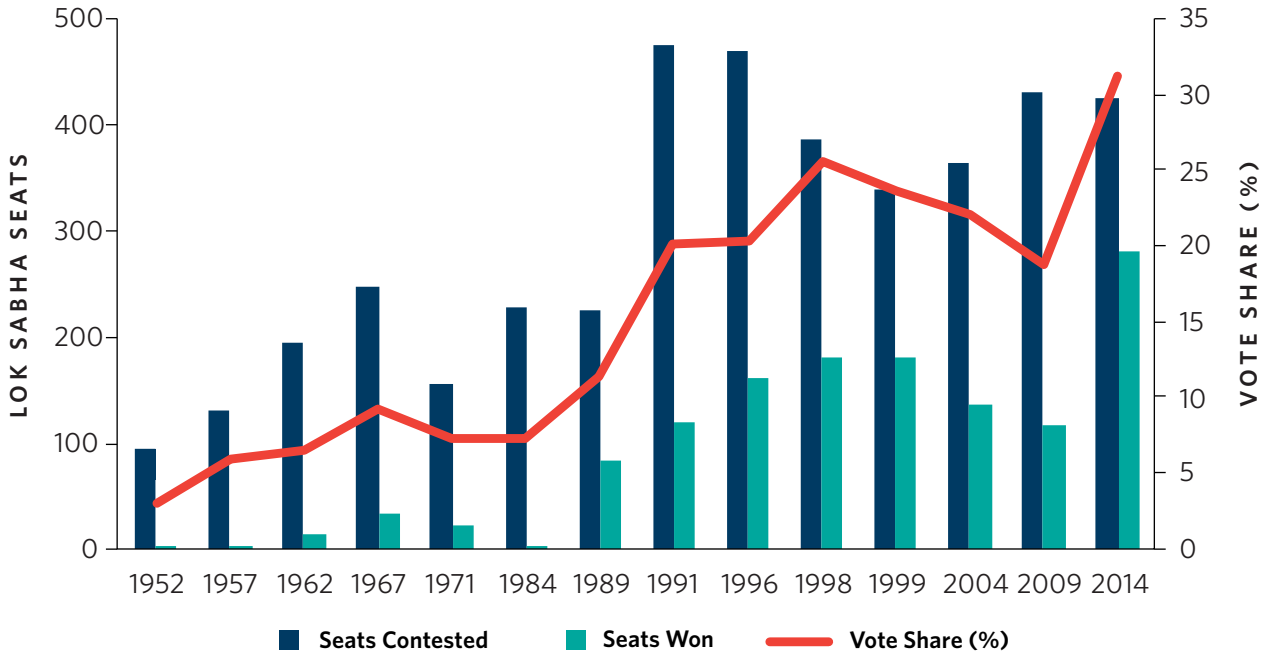
In the wake of the 1996 elections, the BJP earned a plurality of seats in the lower house of parliament and had an opportunity to form a government, but it failed to cobble together a majority on the floor of the Lok Sabha. A coalition of several state-level parties—known as the United Front—assumed power with the support of the Congress Party. The United Front government did not last long, and a midterm election was held in 1998. The BJP managed to form a pre-election coalition with several state-level parties largely opposed to the Congress Party—a bloc known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The party's NDA allies secured a parliamentary majority and formed a government under Vajpayee's leadership. Barely a year after the NDA government took power, a few NDA allies walked out of the coalition, leaving the Vajpayee government short of a clear Lok Sabha majority. The 1999 elections conducted in the aftermath of the India-Pakistan military conflict in Kargil helped the NDA to return to power once more.

Notwithstanding Vajpayee's immense personal popularity and reasonably high degree of satisfaction with the NDA government's performance, the coalition lost the elections in 2004. Instead, a coalition of parties headed by the Congress Party—the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)—formed a government and ruled India for ten consecutive years. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that while the Congress Party's voting bloc began to show significant cracks between 1989 and 2014, the BJP's core coalition of voters demonstrated notable staying power.[118] Despite fumbling the 2004 and 2009 nationwide elections, the party kept making electoral gains beyond its traditional strongholds in northern and western India (see figure 2).

2014 and the Dawn of BJP Electoral Hegemony?

In clinching the 2014 general election, the BJP meticulously stitched together a unique coalition, drawn not only from its traditional upper-caste supporters but also from many voters belonging to marginalized communities, including OBCs, Dalits, and Scheduled Tribes (STs).[119] How did the BJP

FIGURE 2
The BJP's Rise in the Lok Sabha



Source: Author's analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017.

Note: Data points prior to 1984 refer to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), the predecessor of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

assemble this coalition? The fact that social conservatives voted for the BJP was nothing new; such conservative voters, many of whom belong to the upper castes, have consistently supported the BJP.[120] Rather, what made the 2014 election distinctive was the BJP's ability to attract a wave of voters against statism into its tent. These emergent BJP supporters tend to be skeptical of government intrusion on matters of social norms as well as economic policy, and they tend to prefer a state that limits its involvement in the business sector.[121]

In stitching together this historic assemblage of voters who disfavor both statism and recognition, the BJP was greatly aided by the foibles of the Congress-led UPA government in the lead-up to the 2014 election. During its decadelong stint in power, the UPA government had unveiled a number of signature welfare programs (such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) designed to benefit the poor and historically disadvantaged groups like Dalits, Muslims, and STs. Unfortunately for the Congress, the UPA's rollout of these policies was clouded by widespread accusations of venality and wastefulness, further fueling the emergence of anti-statism as an influential electoral force. To add insult to injury, the Congress Party's foibles during its second term in office fed the perception that the party was not only statist, but that it was also driven by a "politics of personalism" (that is, the notion that the state and its resources are the preserve of a select few)—diametrically opposed to statism.[122] Statist politics are shrouded in a moral sense that the state is a joint enterprise held by all citizens to advance the well-being

of everyone in the society. If and when a government becomes a refuge for only select members of society and venality becomes pervasive, a statist political vision loses its moral power of imagination and the ability to enlist citizens' enthusiastic support. The Congress Party's woes further reinforced the BJP's attempts to rally voters against policies of recognition and statism.

It is difficult to overstate the role that Modi's candidacy played in the BJP's 2014 approach. After serving as chief minister of Gujarat for more than a dozen years, Modi had cultivated an image as a "socially conservative majoritarian" who was also a "pro-business reformer" with an aversion to the heavy-handed form of statism favored by the Congress and its allies.[123] An analysis of 2014 CSDS-Lokniti National Election Studies (NES) data suggests that the BJP's victory benefited hugely from a "Modi effect." Modi's vows to eschew "tokenism" and "special privileges" resonated with Indian citizens who resented the politics of recognition, and his track record of lofty economic achievements in Gujarat drew voters who disliked state intrusions into the economic sphere.[124] The Modi effect was most visible from the fact that, in 2014, voters opposed to the politics of statism were drawn to the BJP because of Modi's credentials as a leader who presided over an efficient, inclusive model of economic governance. In short, Modi singlehandedly added a new segment of voters to the BJP who otherwise likely would have not voted for the party. The 2014 NES survey posed the question of whether voters would have backed the BJP if Modi had not appeared on the ballot as the party's choice for prime minister. One of every four respondents who had voted for the NDA said they would not have voted for it if Modi had not been its candidate.[125] Interestingly, Modi's candidacy had no discernable added effect on voters opposed to the politics of recognition; they favored the BJP regardless.

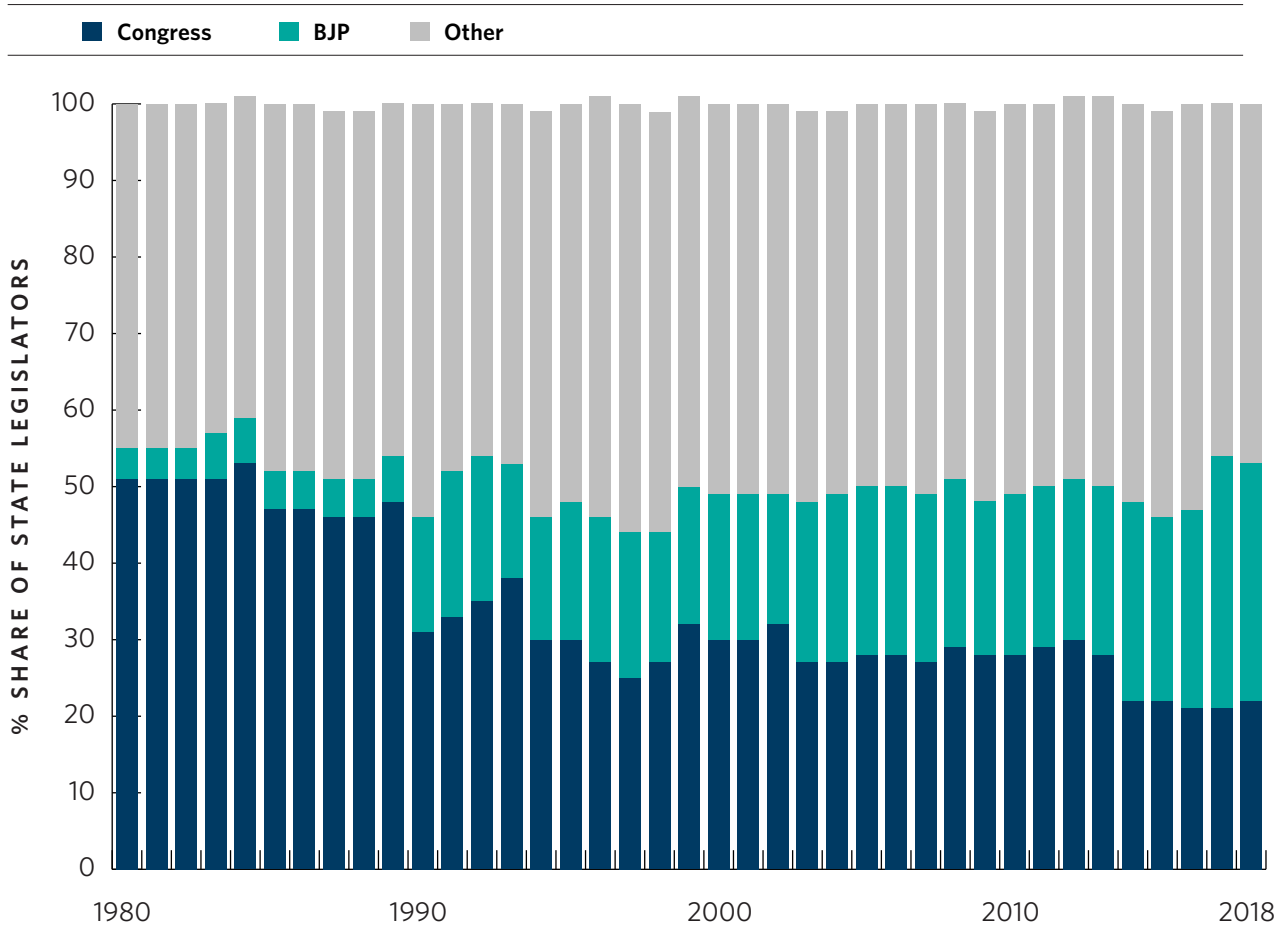
In 2014, the BJP under Modi, as political scientist Suhas Palshikar argues, suddenly became a party of different meanings for different echelons of Indian society:

> To its core constituency, it continued to be a party of Hindutva; to the OBCs, it represented a vehicle of political power, a vehicle articulating and absorbing their democratic upsurge; for power-seekers, it was a convenient platform offering the possibility of tactical use of the Hindutva weapon when required; for devout Hindus, it represented the religious assertion of the Hindu religion; to the new and upwardly-mobile lower-middle sections, the party represented new possibilities of economic benefit.[126]

THE ASCENDANT BJP AND THE FUTURE OF THE INDIAN PARTY SYSTEM

With its landslide win in 2014, the BJP ushered in a far-reaching recalibration of the social coalitions that confer political influence in India.[127] Following the 2014 general election, the BJP steadily expanded its electoral footprint across India, especially in states where the party was not previously considered a viable option; along the way, the party extended its reach across great swaths of the country. The BJP's electoral juggernaut has prompted many observers of Indian politics to suggest that Indian politics is once more witnessing a dominant-party phase, but this time with the BJP rather than the Congress as the central pillar.[128] Some analysts have argued that while the BJP may suffer losses in the Hindi heartland in the 2019 elections—a region it virtually swept five years earlier—it is poised to make gains in eastern India.[129] Despite the party's recent defeats in bastions such as Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, the BJP still rules large parts of India. And the party still holds more state legislators (members of the legislative assemblies, or MLAs) than the Congress Party (see figure 3). Beyond a doubt, the BJP has supplanted its Congress rival as India's top-flight political party. Now the political calculus that informs electioneering in India revolves around the BJP; nearly all political alliances are predicated on embracing or countering the leading party.[130]

FIGURE 3A
State Legislators' Party Affiliations



Source: Adapted from figure 7 in Milan Vaishnav, Jayaram Ravi, and Jamie Hintson, "Is the BJP India's New Hegemon?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 8, 2018 (used with permission). Based on analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017.

Note: This figure depicts the annual share of members of state legislative assemblies (MLAs); values may not add to 100% due to rounding.

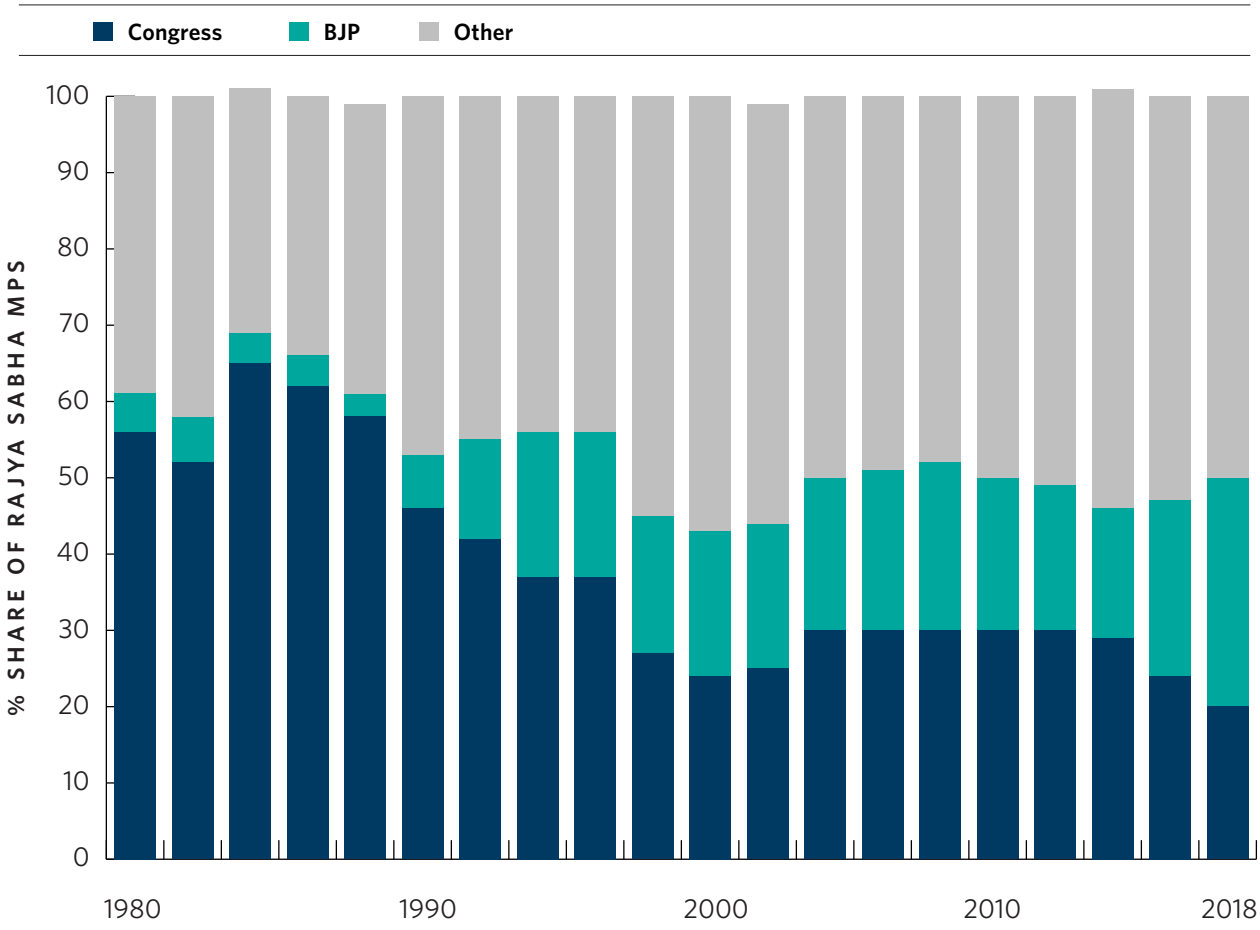
Cracks Within the BJP's Ideological Coalitions

While the BJP has emerged as the Indian political system's singularly influential actor, to remain in that role, the party needs to deal with emerging contradictions that most parties face during their expansionist phases. Looking ahead, an important hurdle confronting the BJP is how to keep its diverse coalition together, especially as the overlap between two of its key constituencies—those who favor Hindu nationalism and those who disdain identity-based quotas—shrinks.

The flurry of protests surrounding the issue of reservations in educational institutions and civil service posts (such as the 2015 unrest in the Patidar community in Gujarat) demonstrates that many young Indians appear to favor a meritocratic alternative to the

FIGURE 3B

Rajya Sabha Members' Party Affilations



Source: Adapted from figure 8 in Milan Vaishnav, Jayaram Ravi, and Jamie Hintson, "Is the BJP India's New Hegemon?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 8, 2018 (used with permission). Based on analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017.

Note: This figure depicts the bi-annual share of Rajya Sabha members of parliament (MPs); values may not add to 100% due to rounding.

status quo. However, a CSDS-Lokniti poll indicates that the majority of these same young Indians do not openly support the excesses of Hindutva policies or political tactics that disparage or devalue Muslims.[131] The party faces a similar challenge on the statism dimension. Statist policies, in the eyes of India's burgeoning middle-class population of well-educated urban dwellers, have lost considerable currency. Instead, this demographic group backs a more progressive social policy platform and prefers a government that curtails the extent of its economic interventionism.

India's urban population is surging, and its economy is becoming more driven by the private sector than state-directed entities. This sea change is reshaping Indian voting coalitions and their views on issues of statism and recognition. Modi's party has retained its aversion to state intrusions on social normative issues when it

feels the state is unduly disrupting Hindu interests (for example, the Sabarimala temple entry issue in Kerala), although it draws a firm line against some Muslim customs (like the Islamic practice of instant divorce known as triple talaq). Yet sometimes the BJP supports strong government intervention, like when it comes to outlawing the slaughter of cows; the party maintains that killing cows violates Indian social customs. Presumably, electoral calculus undergirds this policy position. In pursuing this strategy, the BJP is framing voters' choice at the ballot box as a bid in favor of the country's Hindu majority (by siding with the BJP) or the Muslim community (by siding with the Congress Party and other competitors).

While the party's Hindu majoritarian bent may make for good politics in the short run, it will impose significant costs over the long run. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, many of the BJP's voters—especially among young, urban, and middle-class Indians—do not support the BJP's majoritarian rhetoric. Consider, for example, two nationwide opinion polls conducted by CSDS-Lokniti in 2013 and in 2016, respectively.[132] The earlier 2013 survey indicated that young Hindu city dwellers espouse much greater support for secularism than their older counterparts. Furthermore, the 2016 youth survey reported a substantial plurality of upper-middle-class, urban-dwelling young people who have finished graduate school (a group that is historically more likely to vote for the BJP) stand opposed to both identity-based reservations and prejudices against Muslims. These trends are likely to deepen, if the available survey evidence is any guide. Comparing the readouts of 2007 and 2016 youth surveys, both conducted by CSDS-Lokniti, indicates that young Indian people are more accommodating than their parents toward social customs ranging from marrying outside one's caste to drinking alcohol.[133]

A primary concern of India's youth is middling job prospects. According to a 2018 CSDS-Lokniti poll, one-third of younger respondents identified a lack of job opportunities as India's leading policy problem.[134] This figure is much higher than even what was recorded in the 2016 youth survey.[135] Indian young people's trepidations on the employment front appear not to correspond to their views on social normative issues. For now, youthful voters may overlook the BJP's excess Hindutva predilections for want of other suitable choices. But it would be unwise for the BJP to expect that this support will persist indefinitely.

The BJP undercut the Congress Party's rendition of statism in 2014 because the public largely seemed to feel that the latter had descended into a morass of cronyism and corruption. The dynastic nature of the Congress Party was a central trope of the BJP's election campaign; indeed, Modi kept on contrasting the entitled family politics of the Congress Party and other regional rivals with his modest beginnings selling tea (as a *chaiwallah*) and the BJP's reputation as a cadre-driven party in which politicians climb the ranks based on merit. This allowed him to go on the offensive on the campaign trail, promising voters a future marked by greater egalitarianism irrespective of differences along caste, religious, or class lines. Empowerment, not entitlement, would be the hallmark of a BJP government. Many observers have argued that the Modi government's central campaign promise related to statism—vowing to forge an economic model designed to improve the lives of all citizens—has not lived up to expectations. Though the BJP government has made gestures such as the decision to demonetize high-value currency notes to undercut corrupt practices, it has failed to offer an alternate economic vision that could be shared by most Indians.

Cracks within the BJP's Social Coalition

In the BJP's early years, the party attracted supporters mainly from Hindu upper caste communities. Starting in the late 1980s, the political concerns of OBCs and Dalits took on added political salience as some political actors began mobilizing to give voice to lower caste concerns. The BJP sought to broaden its electoral footprint by positioning itself as a vehicle for

these groups' political ambitions. One prominent RSS figure advocated for the party to recruit leaders from lower castes, a tactic that allowed the BJP to make inroads in multiple corners of the country, especially in northwestern India. The BJP embraced this strategy for only a short while, however, before Vajpayee and other party leaders sought to reverse course and reassert upper caste dominance over the party's higher echelons.

After a string of electoral losses in 2004 and 2009, the BJP stormed back to power in 2014 by simultaneously maintaining robust upper caste support and bringing substantial numbers of OBC, Dalit, and Adivasi voters into the fold.[136] The electoral victory under Modi marked the culmination of a "slow transformation" that the party's supporters had been undergoing for years.[137] For the previous twenty years, the composition of BJP voters had been shifting as upper caste citizens made up an ever-shrinking percentage share of the party's base (see figure 1 in chapter 2). The most sizable segment of the party's winning coalition was OBCs, whose share of the BJP's total vote share outpaced that of the upper castes. In other words, while the upper castes still lean heavily BJP, they make up a smaller relative proportion of the BJP's vote than OBCs, given the latter's share of the electorate. The BJP also attracted a greater share of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) voters than it had in previous contests. This political sea change is remarkable. Whereas in the mid-1990s 45 percent of Hindu BJP voters were from the upper castes, 35 percent were OBCs, and merely 20 percent were SCs and STs, in 2014, the BJP's Hindu coalition boasted 44 percent OBCs, 31 percent from upper castes, and a full 25 percent SCs and STs.[138]

While what qualifies as the typical BJP voter shifted profoundly in 2014, upper castes are overrepresented in the party's parliamentarian ranks.[139] Two out of every three cabinet ministers hail from the upper castes as well, a figure that is at odds with the degree of electoral support that the party drew from that quarter in the most recent national election.[140] To make matters worse, of the few ministers that are from other castes, nearly 50 percent of them are affiliated with various BJP coalition partners rather than the party itself. Likewise, most of the chief ministers in states run by the BJP and its NDA allies are from upper castes as well.

The BJP faces a monumental political quandary, a mismatch between a voter bloc that draws support increasingly from lower caste communities and an immutable leadership that has retained its historical upper caste tenor.[141] The Congress Party's inability to incorporate and integrate Indian communities beyond the upper castes into its leadership ranks in the 1960s eroded its political dominance over time. This logjam of depressed lower and intermediate caste representation in the Congress Party eventually prompted an exodus of those voting communities as they turned to other parties that would give greater voice to their political concerns.

Countless Indians who are not from upper castes are bound to harbor ill will over the fact that they are underrepresented in prominent positions such as parliament and state assemblies, lofty posts in government officialdom, private companies, and even less prominent public-sector jobs including the education sector. This could lead to a politically explosive debate and conflicting demands as some groups seek expanded reservation status to cover previously uncovered populations while other quarters call for the government to scrap the reservation system altogether. Many young Hindus are leery of quotas that single out specific castes or religious communities, though a significant share of them (even those who support the BJP) are open to such measures for economically marginalized groups, according to a 2013 CSDS-Lokniti tracker poll survey.[142]

Multiple Indian political parties have a history of pushing for identity-based quotas for poor pockets of India's upper caste groups too, and the BJP government in the run-up to the 2019 election opportunistically introduced a new constitutional amendment mandating 10 percent reservations for economically poor individuals not covered under any other existing

"The BJP and the RSS have aggressively tried to shepherd India in a more conservative direction on questions of statism and recognition. But this approach is a perilous one."

group-based quotas. Some argue that the BJP's move is meant to appease upper caste voters who seemed unhappy with the BJP for many reasons, especially the Modi government's action in the controversy over the SC-ST Act.[143]

CONCLUSION

When political parties seek to expand their reach, they often develop contradictory tendencies. If these contradictions are not adequately managed, they can become a key source of organizational degeneration. Can the BJP finesse its coalition's emerging tensions? Since coming to power in 2014, the BJP and the RSS have aggressively tried to shepherd India in a more conservative direction on questions of statism and recognition. But this approach is a perilous one.

The BJP's decision to grant a 10 percent quota to economically weaker sections of the general population is an attempt to shift the discourse on quota politics from caste to class. While this may mollify disgruntled elements of the BJP's upper caste base (who were previously untouched by reservations), it is simultaneously bound to alienate a section of the party's lower caste base. This disjuncture will be further accentuated if the BJP fails to provide adequate representation to lower caste politicians within the party's decisionmaking hierarchy—an area where it continues to lag. If the BJP tries to use its ideological machinery to nudge median voters to support majoritarian policies and to rely on the government as an agent of pro-Hindu state interventions on social norms, it may alienate a segment of the country's (growing) urban middle class that holds a very different worldview. Indian norms on questions of marriage and romantic relationships, for instance, involve a deep-rooted tension: should the government permit conservative activists to place limits on whom citizens can marry, or should citizens be allowed to choose freely themselves? The more influential that religious figures become in the party's coalition, the more policy influence they will seek to accrue; this will likely make the party stake out a more conservative social policy agenda than other Indians want, particularly middle-class urban dwellers.

Even if the ideological position of the median citizen gradually does shift rightward, this would still pose serious risks to the BJP's standing. Such a shift would increase the chances of discord between different religious sects and castes, an outcome that would imperil the BJP's claimed mantle as a protector of citizens irrespective of caste or creed. This brand of religiously inspired politics will also affect the economy, as market actors are likely to respond unfavorably to a climate of mounting religious tensions. Such a backlash will probably create further pressures on the state to shoulder the burden of economic development. In such a situation, a substantial segment of the BJP's support among the aspiring middle classes, trading communities, and youth could easily get disillusioned with the party's economic agenda.

By dint of his unique charisma and image, Modi has skillfully navigated these tensions within the BJP's coalition so far. The bigger question is how the party will handle these fissures if and when Modi's personal popularity dips and the BJP's electoral fortunes sour. In the next few months, the BJP's challenges could become more evident. If the party fails to form the next central government and performs poorly in state elections in the months to come, the party's newly created coalition could implode, leading to a premature demise of the BJP-dominant party system. However, if the party does return to power and maintains its electoral dominance in the states, then the unraveling of its coalition would instead take place more slowly over time.

CHAPTER 3

THE BJP'S ELECTORAL ARITHMETIC

RUKMINI S.

The scale of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory in India's 2014 parliamentary elections took most observers by surprise. There were visible signs of deep public frustration with the incumbent United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by India's Grand Old Party, the Indian National Congress, centered on dissatisfaction with a stalling economy, skyrocketing food prices, and the alleged involvement of Congress Party functionaries and political allies in large-scale corruption. While many analysts had tipped the BJP to emerge as the single largest party in the parliament, no credible polling agency or political observer predicted the size of the wave.

By securing 282 seats in the Lok Sabha, the BJP pulled off the biggest win in the country's modern history since the Congress Party swept the 1984 elections on a wave of sympathy following the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi. When the BJP dubbed its final campaign push "Mission 272+" in reference to the number of seats it needed to secure a majority in parliament without help from allies, the aspiration sounded fantastical.[144] And yet, when all the votes were counted, the party easily soared past that halfway mark on its own.

Since May 2014, some observers have tended to frame this feat as inexplicable, a black swan event that did not follow the known trajectories of Indian politics.

"[In 2014,] Modi . . . became so extraordinarily popular that he was able to create an electoral wave that propelled the [BJP] further ahead."

While the BJP undoubtedly took electoral arithmetic in new directions in 2014, the historical processes and new calculations behind them can indeed be parsed. Doing so requires examining the social engineering the BJP used to bring in one of every three votes cast nationwide.[145]

Two factors contributed to the BJP's electoral success and the expanded reach that drove that success. First, the party chose as its prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, a leader who quickly became so extraordinarily popular that he was able to create an electoral wave that propelled the party further ahead. Second, the BJP managed to win the favor of castes, ideological adherents, demographic groups, and geographic areas that were not previously solidly BJP votaries. While local constituency-level calculations played a role in bringing some of these new groups into the fold, an overarching theme was the consolidation of Hindu castes under a muscular majoritarian appeal. Not all of these new coalitions are entirely natural, and

many of them are rife with internal contradictions. For the BJP to hold them together once again in 2019 will be difficult, and several cracks are already apparent.

MODI'S OUTSIZE POPULARITY

Traditionally, according to opinion polls, Indian citizens have tended to report that the biggest factor governing their voting choices is political parties, not individual candidates; this has led some observers to believe that Indian elections are parliamentary rather than presidential. But what makes voters choose a certain party? The leading rationale voters cite in opinion surveys is "good leadership"; while it is certainly true that Indian voters might be more influenced by parties than by individual candidates, there is evidence to suggest that the figure atop a given party carries the most weight. In the wake of the 2014 election, the Lokniti Program administered by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) reported that many Indian voters care more about which candidates are running for the post of prime minister than for local elected positions.[146]

The BJP's historic victory in 2014 was undoubtedly powered by Modi's widespread popularity, which outstripped that of the party as a whole. If the BJP had selected a different candidate for prime minister, one in five respondents from a 2014 postelection CSDS-Lokniti survey indicated that they would have gone with a different party.[147] The survey found that Modi's personal popularity outpaced that of the BJP by about 8 percentage points (36 percent to 28 percent), whereas his chief rival, Congress President Rahul Gandhi, trailed his party in popularity by 4 percentage points (14 percent to 18 percent). The gap between the share of voters who preferred the BJP's stance over the Congress Party's position on prominent electoral issues—including corruption, inflation, job growth, and counterterrorism—was smaller (10–12 percentage points) than the distance between voters' views on Modi and Gandhi (15–17 percentage points).[148]

In subsequent state elections held between 2014 and 2018, Modi's popularity sometimes has surpassed that of the party's own local leaders.[149] For instance, a survey conducted by CSDS-Lokniti ahead of Uttar Pradesh's 2017 state assembly election found that Modi was the third-most-popular chief ministerial candidate, placing him higher than the BJP's eventual pick, Yogi Adityanath. Furthermore, when respondents were asked what factors shaped their voting decisions, in addition to the usual responses (party, chief ministerial candidate, local candidates), 8 percent of respondents said "Narendra Modi." These twin facts are remarkable given that Modi, as prime minister, figured nowhere on the ballot.[150]

As India heads into its seventeenth general election in April and May 2019, there are initial signs that the honeymoon Modi has enjoyed is subsiding. In the spring of 2018, the BJP performed poorly in parliamentary and state assembly by-elections, ceding valuable ground to the opposition in electorally pivotal states. In critical state elections held in December 2018, the BJP lost power in three of its strongholds in the Hindi heartland—Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. In two other states, Mizoram and Telangana, it failed to make gains from an admittedly low base.

Even several months before these regional electoral contests, a May 2018 CSDS-Lokniti pre-poll survey detected incipient pangs of anti-incumbency against the BJP. Nearly half of all respondents (47 percent) stated that the Modi government did not deserve a second term in office.[151] However, it is worth pointing out that support for the party was nearly the same as the results of CSDS-Lokniti's last pre-poll survey before the 2014 election.[152] Modi's polling numbers have also fallen off slightly, but, given the bump in his approval ratings after he took office, his numbers are down by just two percentage points (to a still-respectable 34 percent) since 2014.[153] Meanwhile, the polling data on Rahul Gandhi is at a post-2014 peak, but the leading opposition figure still trails Modi by 10 percentage points (down from a gap of 17 percentage points in

January 2018). CSDS-Lokniti has characterized its May 2018 survey results as "indicative of a declining trend, one that the BJP has been unable to stem."[154]

If anti-incumbency sentiments have set in, a party leader's personal popularity alone generally is unlikely to reverse its fortunes, but Modi is a once-in-a-generation politician and an exceptionally strong campaigner. After all, in 2004, voters rated then BJP prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee quite favorably, but he was unable to overcome the relative unpopularity of his party, which lost the election. Arguably, recent tensions between India and Pakistan—triggered by the February 14 terrorist attack at Pulwama in the state of Jammu and Kashmir—will only further bolster Modi's standing among the broader public. His decision to authorize aerial strikes on camps operated by the terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) fits neatly with his carefully cultivated reputation as a decisive leader who is tough on terrorism. There are indications that he will use this issue on the campaign trail. The outcome of India's general elections in April–May 2019 will hang on whether Modi's personal appeal can compensate for his party's receding popularity.

BUILDING NEW SOCIAL COALITIONS AMONG HINDUS

There is no way to whitewash the fact that voting along caste lines remains a feature of Indian politics; over 45 percent of voters still say that it is important to them that a candidate of their own caste wins in their district.[155] India's first-past-the-post electoral system, much like U.S. congressional races, results in highly intense, mathematically driven political strategizing. In 2014, the BJP won more than half the seats in parliament with less than one-third of the actual votes cast.[156] In such an environment, with at least a handful of serious competitors and dozens of independent candidates hiving off votes in every constituency, parties must court a steady support base of voters from disparate castes to build a winning coalition.

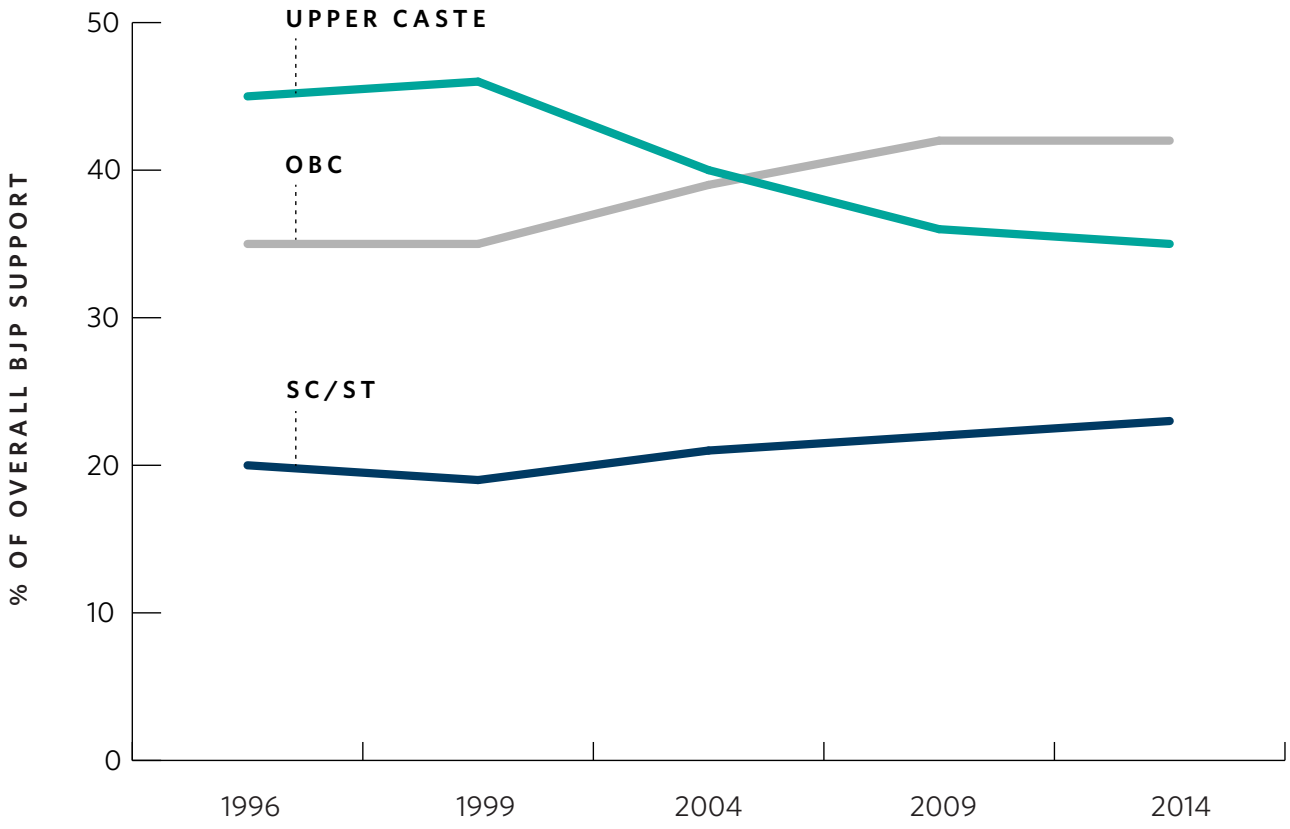
According to India's most recent census (2011), Scheduled Castes (SCs) form 16.6 percent of the population, while Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute 8.6 percent. While there are no official figures for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and upper castes, these groups are generally understood to comprise between 40 and 50 percent and around 10 percent of the population, respectively. Muslims account for roughly 14 percent of the population, with other minorities (Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and others) accounting for the balance.[157]

Since India gained independence, the Congress Party historically has been the country's big tent party, attracting religious minorities with its foundational secularism, marginalized Hindus with its stated aim of eradicating poverty and supporting equality, and upper caste Hindus with, among other things, its solidly upper caste Hindu leadership. The BJP—and its predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS)—traditionally has been associated with upper caste northern Indian Hindu voters, leading some observers to pejoratively describe it as a "Brahmin-Bania party."[158] But this pattern has been starting to change.

Available data, until recently, bore these generalizations out: if voters are divided into three overarching caste categories—upper castes, OBCs, and SCs/STs—the largest share of the BJP's votes traditionally came from upper caste voters (see figure 1).[159] Since 1999, however, the share of BJP voters who are from the upper castes has been declining (even as upper caste support for the party remains robust), as growing support for the BJP among OBC and now SC voters has changed the composition of the party's support base on a percentage basis.

Despite the BJP's decreasing dependence on upper caste voters, the affinity that many upper caste Hindu voters feel for the party has not lessened; in fact, especially compared to its chief rival, the Congress Party, the commitment of upper caste voters to the BJP was as high as it had ever been in 2014. The share

FIGURE 1
The BJP's Evolving Social Coalition



Source: CSDS-Lokniti Program National Election Studies, 1996–2014; Rahul Verma, "By Ignoring OBCs for Party Positions, BJP Would Repeat Congress' Fatal Mistake," *ThePrint*, August 6, 2018.

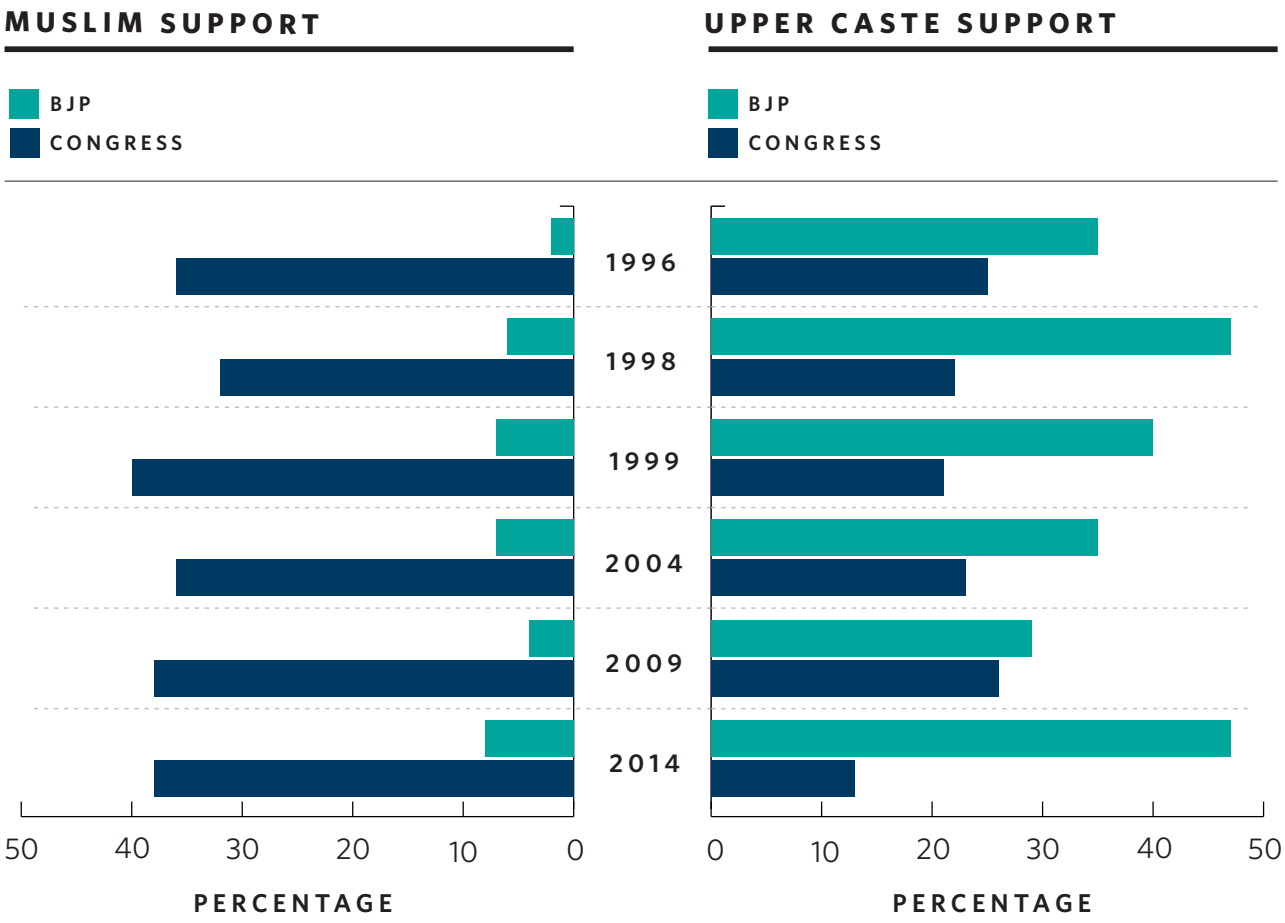
Note: OBC refers to Other Backward Classes and SC/ST refers to Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes. The y-axis measures the extent of the BJP's support from specified castes and communities.

of upper caste voters who prefer the Congress Party, however, was far lower in the 2014 general election (13 percent) than it had been in previous elections, a particularly stunning reversal of what had been a narrowing gap in the respective upper caste support for the Congress Party and the BJP between 1998 and 2009 (see figure 2).[160] In a sense, the upper castes come closest to what the BJP often pejoratively refers to as vote banks—groups that a party typically panders to so as to secure a reliable source of votes for that party. For the BJP and its supporters, the Congress Party's outreach to Muslims resembles a form of appeasement designed to turn the community into loyal supporters. Yet the BJP has consistently polled better among upper castes than the Congress Party has with Muslims—a more mathematically sound description of a vote bank than their usual charge.

While anti-incumbency is a real threat, support for the BJP among upper castes and lower sections of the OBCs remains strong: more than half of upper castes and poorer OBCs said in CSDS-Lokniti's May 2018 survey that they wanted the Modi-led government to get another chance.[161] Recently, the BJP government

FIGURE 2

Muslim and Upper Caste Support for the Congress Party and the BJP



Source: CSDS-Lokniti Program National Election Studies, 1996–2014.

decided to reserve 10 percent of seats in educational institutions and civil service jobs for economically backward sections of the general population that were previously untouched by affirmative action.[162] This decision, which satisfied a long-standing demand of upper castes who resent quotas for backward castes, is expected to push the BJP's favorable ratings even higher. Among richer OBCs, some of whom tend to vote for caste-based parties like the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh or the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, support for the BJP getting another term in office was lower than that of lower OBCs, but still above 40 percent.[163]

What has changed for the BJP is how communities other than upper castes vote. Once again, Modi's personal appeal matters. In the 2014 campaign, Modi mentioned his own OBC background only tangentially, talking since his first campaign speech of his economically modest beginnings.[164] In the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, which contributes 80 seats (out of 543 in the Lok Sabha), the BJP needed OBC votes to sweep the state; when campaigning there, Modi recalled the debt he owed B. R. Ambedkar, the father of India's constitution and a Scheduled Caste (or Dalit, as the grouping of lower castes is commonly described)

icon, for his efforts to give oppressed communities (like Modi's own) the opportunity to rise.[165]

In the 2014 election, the BJP got its highest ever vote share among Dalits, the first time in a national election that more Dalits voted for the BJP than they did for the Congress.[166] The other, larger shift since the late 1990s has been that of OBC support for the BJP, which the party has methodically built up; OBCs, too, voted in record numbers for the party in 2014.[167]

Some of the BJP's newfound support was won through shrewd calculations bolstered by effective campaigning. There is substantial economic inequality at the subcaste or *jati* level, to the extent that, in some states, studies have found greater differences between jati categories than between broader caste categories.[168] These inequalities feed directly into the intersection of ethnic politics and the country's first-past-the-post electoral system; research on jati-level voting suggests that income disparities between two jati groups can explain a significant extent of the differences in voting behavior between them.[169]

The BJP has understood these rivalries and exploited them wherever possible. In Uttar Pradesh, the Jatav community—a subcategory of Scheduled Castes—remains steadfastly aligned with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and its Jatav leader Mayawati, so the BJP targeted non-Jatav SC groups such as Valmikis and Pasis. Survey data from *India Today* gathered around the time of the state's 2017 election also showed significant support for the BJP among non-Jatav SCs.[170] This phenomenon was much more apparent in the 2017 Uttar Pradesh state elections, as survey data showed strong support for the BJP among EBCs (a subgroup of Extremely Backward Classes under the OBC umbrella) who felt ignored by the incumbent Samajwadi Party and its Yadav (a dominant OBC caste) vote bank.[171] In both cases, the BJP succeeded in creating a wedge between dominant subcastes under the SC and OBC umbrellas to appeal to subcastes who perceived that they had fallen behind.

Another side of the BJP's pan-Hindu overtures is more pernicious. Some of the party's unusual coalitions in 2014 were also a result of the BJP and its Hindutva allies' propaganda, fear-mongering, and outright discrimination and, in some cases, violence against Muslims. There is now scholarly evidence of what political actors and analysts have long taken as a given in India: communal violence appears to benefit the BJP electorally. Two recent academic studies have suggested that riots are associated with a higher BJP vote share in the subsequent election.

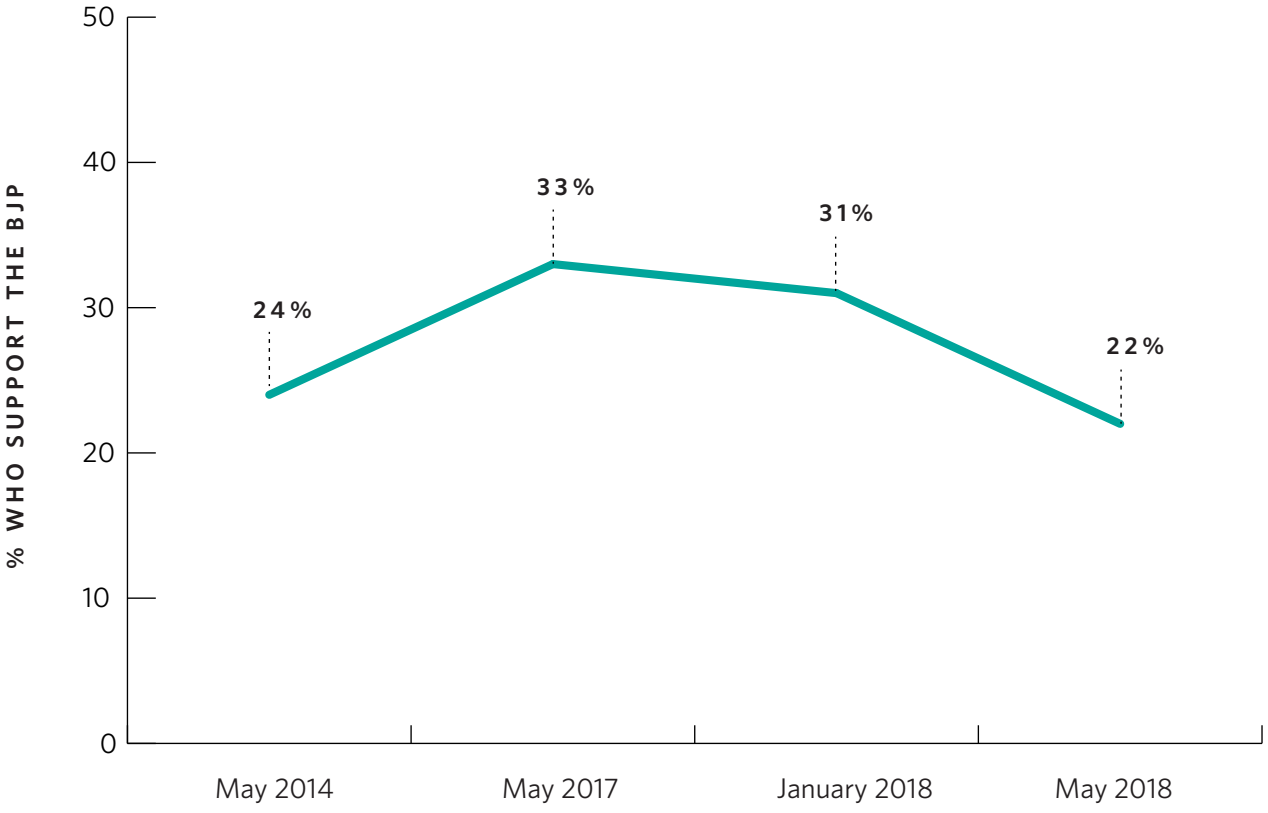
In one of the studies, Gareth Nellis and his colleagues found that, between 1962 and 2000, the BJS/BJP's vote share grew by less than 1 percentage point (0.8) on average following Hindu-Muslim unrest in the year before ballots were cast.[172] The reason for this gain, the authors suggest, is that post-riot religious and ethnic polarization tends to lead to a consolidation of Hindu votes in favor of the BJP. In a second (unpublished) study, Rohit Ticku found that the BJP tended to expand its share of the vote (by nearly 3 to 4.5 percent) following riots that took place within half a year of an election. Ticku suggested that riots may be an outgrowth of the "electoral incentives" that parties face, stating that "parties representing elites among ethnic groups may have an incentive to instigate ethnic conflict to influence the marginal voter."[173] If the causal mechanism at work in such cases is ethnic polarization, this implies a banding together of Hindu caste groups in a given place who may not all have traditionally voted for the BJP against local Muslims; if that is the case, it could partly explain the formation of the BJP's new social coalitions of increased support among OBC and SC communities.

It is not entirely clear how strongly or how long these BJP caste coalitions will hold, especially in situations where there is conflict between two major caste groups, or where a significant BJP campaign issue benefits one group at the expense of another. Sections of the BJP and its ideological ecosystem have made the protection of cows, revered in Hindu mythology

and by many practitioners of the religion, central to their agenda.

But this assertion of claimed traditional Hindu values comes at great cost—cattle in India are primarily transported, traded, butchered, and consumed by Muslims and Dalits. An entire new cadre of what could be termed cow vigilantes has sprung up, actively aided and abetted by the machinery employed by the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, the broader constellation of Hindu right organizations.[174] On the heels of the lynching of a Muslim man in Uttar Pradesh who was thought to have slaughtered a cow, in July 2016, a group of upper caste men in Gujarat were caught on camera flogging a Dalit family that was skinning a dead cow, leading to mass protests and a galvanizing of young Dalit leaders.[175] Against this backdrop of anti-Dalit violence by individuals and groups aligned with the BJP's Hindutva agenda, Dalit support for the BJP as measured by opinion polls appears to have fallen sharply; by the middle of 2018, the share of Dalits who support the party had sunk to pre-2014 levels, and below the level of Dalit support for the Congress Party (see figure 3).[176] Elections in three Hindi heartland states at the end of 2018 confirmed that Dalit and tribal support for the party had crashed and was shifting to the Congress Party.[177]

FIGURE 3
Declining Dalit Support for the BJP



Source: CSDS-Lokniti Program National Election Study, 2014; Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News Mood of the Nation Survey, 2014, 2017, 2018.

Note: The May 2014 figure reflects declared voter choices, while the subsequent figures reflect voting intentions. The term Dalit is used interchangeably with Scheduled Caste.

MISSING MUSLIMS

Meanwhile, given the excesses of the BJP's pan-Hinduism, there are unsurprisingly some social groups that never factored into the BJP's electoral calculus, namely Muslims. While the BJP's national campaign primarily focused on themes of development and good governance, it strategically deployed pro-Hindu majoritarian sentiment in pockets of the country where it felt that message would find resonance with voters.

In several campaign speeches, Modi made divisive veiled references to Muslim communities. In Assam, he made a distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim immigrants to the country. In Karnataka, he sought to link the beef trade dominated by Muslims to terrorism, and in a state election soon thereafter he sought to warn rallygoers that his opponents would seek to give benefits for backward Hindu caste groups to "another community."[178] Other BJP campaigners also invoked Hindu pride and mythology, stoking a feeling of majoritarian victimhood. In the eastern state of Bihar, a BJP candidate said in a campaign speech that those who did not vote for Modi should seek exile in Muslim-majority Pakistan—Modi later made him a junior minister.[179] In an Uttar Pradesh district that had freshly faced interreligious violence, Modi's closest aide, Amit Shah, now the BJP's president and a member of parliament, called on voters to exact "revenge."[180]

It is perhaps not a surprise that the BJP did not win any of India's fifteen Muslim-majority constituencies in 2014. In eleven of these constituencies, the vote share of the winning candidate was greater than the number of non-Muslims. This means that the winning candidates in these places definitely picked up some Muslim votes.[181] In CSDS-Lokniti's 2014 National Election Study, only 8 percent of surveyed Muslims said that they had voted for the BJP, while the May 2018 pre-election survey pegged Muslims support for the BJP at 10 percent.[182] Although this represents a slight increase in the BJP's low base of Muslim support, Muslim politicians dismiss both numbers out of hand as implausibly high.[183] (One possibility, although it is purely speculative, is that Muslim respondents are afraid to reveal their true voting preferences for fear of backlash.) The party rarely nominates Muslim candidates; in 2014, the BJP fielded just seven Muslims for the Lok Sabha elections, and all of them lost. As a result, the representation of Muslims in the current Lok Sabha is down to just 22 out of 545 MPs, the lowest share in the country's history.[184]

In the five years since the 2014 election, the rhetoric against Muslims by elected BJP representatives has taken a dismaying turn. Yogi Adityanath is a former member of parliament who has said in speeches that Muslims caused riots, has compared anodyne comments by a Muslim movie star to statements by Islamic terrorists, and has exhorted his supporters to kill 100 Muslims if one Hindu was killed. He was made the BJP's chief minister in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, in 2017.[185] Another sitting legislator said in early 2018 that Muslims have no business in India and should go to Bangladesh or Pakistan.[186] Not only have these leaders faced no censure, but grassroots BJP workers or those associated with its ideology have even been praised for their role in anti-Muslim violence. One junior minister garlanded men accused of lynching a Muslim man on suspicion of cow slaughter,[187] and another minister paid his respects at the funeral of a man accused of lynching yet another Muslim man ostensibly for consuming beef.[188]

Against the backdrop of a spate of religiously motivated killings of Muslim men, Indian Muslims and liberals have spoken out about the growing intolerance in the country. Modi, in particular, has not seriously confronted the Muslim community's fears and has, meanwhile, aggressively pushed a controversial change in Muslim personal law that entails jail terms for men who divorce their wives on the spot, a practice known as triple talaq. Modi's majoritarian dog-whistling has even made an appearance on the floor of parliament. During a farewell speech on behalf of the outgoing vice president Hamid Ansari (who is Muslim), Modi

referred to his work (as a diplomat) in Islamic countries and suggested that in retirement he could pursue his "natural" ideology free of the "restrictions" imposed by the constitution.[189] Given the success of its attempts to consolidate Hindu votes across caste and jati groups, the BJP, it would appear, sees few political or electoral dividends in appearing more moderate on this front.

FORGING NEW IDEOLOGICAL COALITIONS

It is not just cleavages of caste and religion that the BJP has sought to leverage for an electoral edge—it has mobilized ideological coalitions as well. The ideas that animate Indian voter behavior are poorly studied, given that the conventional wisdom among political scientists holds that identity, not ideology, shapes the country's voting patterns to a greater extent. As the oft-repeated saying goes, Indians don't cast their votes as much as they vote their caste.

However, new research indicates that Indian voters may be far more ideological than previously thought. Political scientists Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma used data from the National Election Studies conducted by CSDS-Lokniti between 1967 and 2014 to establish that Indian voters hold political beliefs that are extraordinarily stable over time and distinct from those of people who vote for other or rival parties.[190] Chhibber and Verma found that BJS/BJP voters consistently did not support a more active role for the state in the economy or in rewriting social norms, while Left supporters consistently did support these aspirations and Congress supporters were located somewhere in between.[191] Furthermore, these ideological cleavages along party lines seem to transcend social group limits; for instance, BJP voters who hail from the Scheduled Castes tend to favor far less state intervention than the Congress Party's Scheduled Caste voters do.

In 2014, Chhibber and Verma argue that, in addition to its usual socially conservative base, the BJP managed to construct a broader coalition of economically conservative voters who opposed state intervention in the economy and in social norms, as well as affirmative action (or quotas) for marginalized groups. According to Chhibber and Verma, there is now a sharper distinction between Indian voters on economic issues than ever before, and more voters leaned rightward on economic issues in 2014 than in previous years. The growth of India's middle class, whose ranks include many voters who believe that subsidies are harmful and who place a premium on rapid economic growth, contributed to this trend.

Another factor that made people wary of state-led development was the perception that the outgoing Congress-led UPA government was plagued by corruption allegations as well as an overly narrow focus on costly subsidies and support for minorities. Chhibber and Verma argue that it was against this backdrop that candidate Modi was able to draw voters opposed to statism with his promises of "no tokenism" and "no special privileges."[192] The CSDS-Lokniti 2014 National Election Study shows unprecedented ideological polarization; there has never been greater distance between the beliefs of BJP and Congress voters.[193]

INCREMENTALLY ADDING NEW DEMOGRAPHIC COALITIONS

Aside from the support the BJP has sought from lower caste Hindus and economically conservative voters, the party also looked to female and young voters to lengthen its lead in 2014.

The BJP and Female Voters

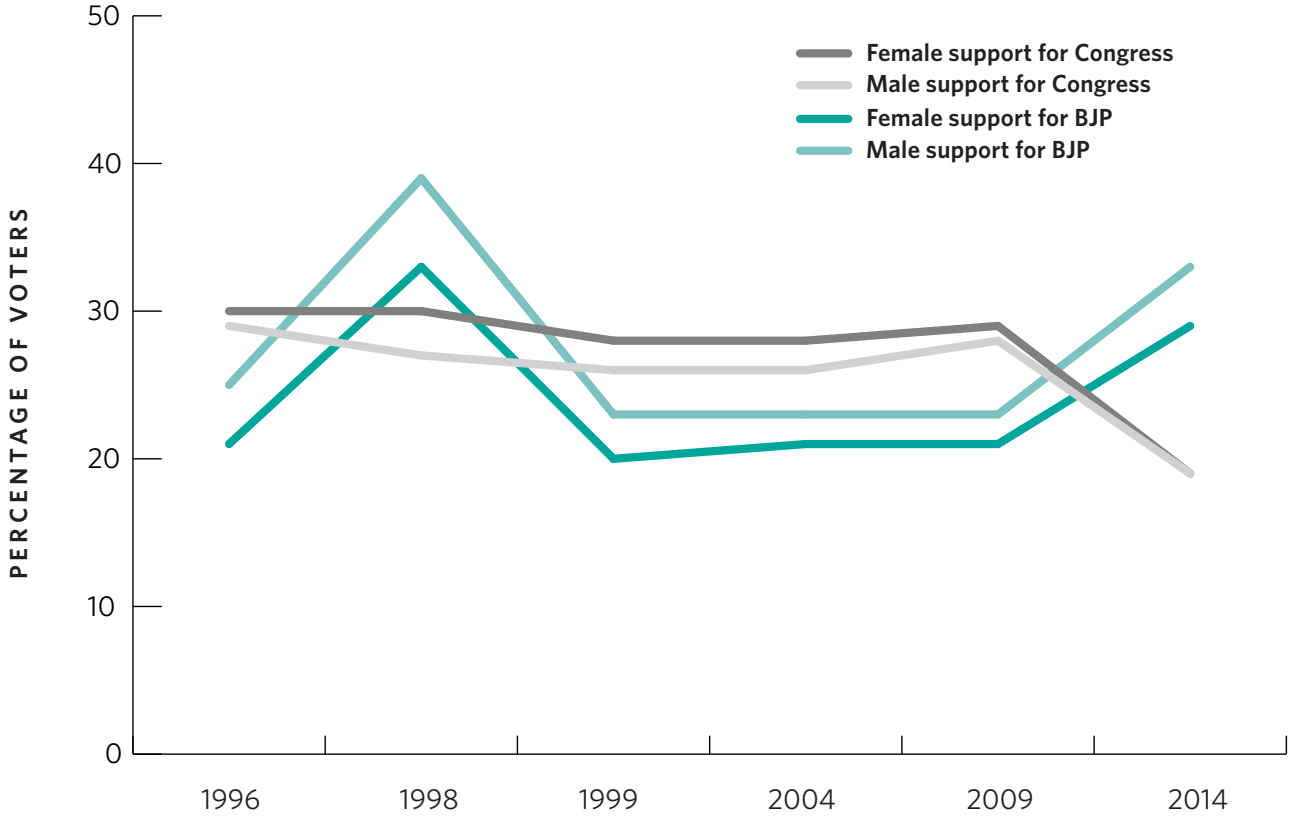
Until recently, the BJP had trouble appealing to women voters. Women's participation in Indian elections is now at a historic high. The rapid growth of female voter enrollment and turnout has been one of the most significant (if poorly understood) electoral

developments of the last decade. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, female voter turnout rose to a historic high of 65.5 percent compared to 67 percent for men—this rise nearly closed the gap between male and female turnout, which had been in or near the double digits up until the early 1990s.[194]

Successive rounds of CSDS-Lokniti National Election Studies, conducted between 1996 and 2009, show that the BJP has generally had a 2 to 3 point disadvantage among women voters as compared to the Congress Party.[195] This state of affairs is broadly similar to the situation in the United States, where women have historically leaned more toward the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. As late as the 2014 general election, CSDS-Lokniti found that the BJP's gender disadvantage has mostly persisted (see figure 4).[196]

Some political leaders have a clear advantage in the eyes of women voters. For instance, regional political parties led by women—the Mehbooba Mufti–led People's Democratic Party, the Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party, the (until recently) Jayalalithaa-led All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, and the Mamata Banerjee–led All India Trinamool Congress—all did better among female voters than among male voters in 2014. Among male leaders, Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United), Shivraj Singh Chouhan of the BJP, K.

FIGURE 4
The BJP's Historic Gender Disadvantage



Source: CSDS-Lokniti Program National Election Studies, 1996–2014.

Chandrashekar Rao of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, and Naveen Patnaik of the Biju Janata Dal all enjoy an advantage among female voters.[197] In contrast, Modi does not appear to have a built-in advantage among female voters. A November 2017 Pew Research Center survey found that Modi was popular among both men and women, but he was viewed less favorably by women in relative terms. The Pew survey notes that women are especially critical of Modi's handling of Hindu-Muslim relations.[198]

But evidence from CSDS-Lokniti suggests that the BJP has now largely shed its gender disadvantage. CSDS-Lokniti's May 2018 survey found that virtually all of the modest increase in the BJP's vote share between 2014 and 2018 came from women voters. In May 2014, 33 percent of men and 29 percent of women preferred the BJP (see figure 4). Four years later, male support for the party stood basically unchanged (at 33 percent), but women's support for the BJP had risen to 31 percent.[199] The Congress Party, meanwhile, had made gains among both men and women, but the May 2018 survey indicated that it could be losing its gender advantage. It is not clear why support for the BJP has risen among women, although many BJP leaders chalk it up to the government's numerous welfare schemes. The empirical evidence for this claim is unclear.[200]

The BJP and Young Voters

Alongside the BJP's ongoing efforts to appeal to female voters, the BJP is doing well with another key constituency in 2014: young voters. India's young voters have represented a rapidly growing segment of the population in recent years. In 2015, the percentage of young Indian voters (between twenty and thirty-four years old) relative to the rest of the electorate was the highest on record (although this share has peaked and is now declining).[201] Moreover, these young voters showed up en masse on election day in 2014; youth turnout exceeded general turnout for the first time since at least 1999.[202]

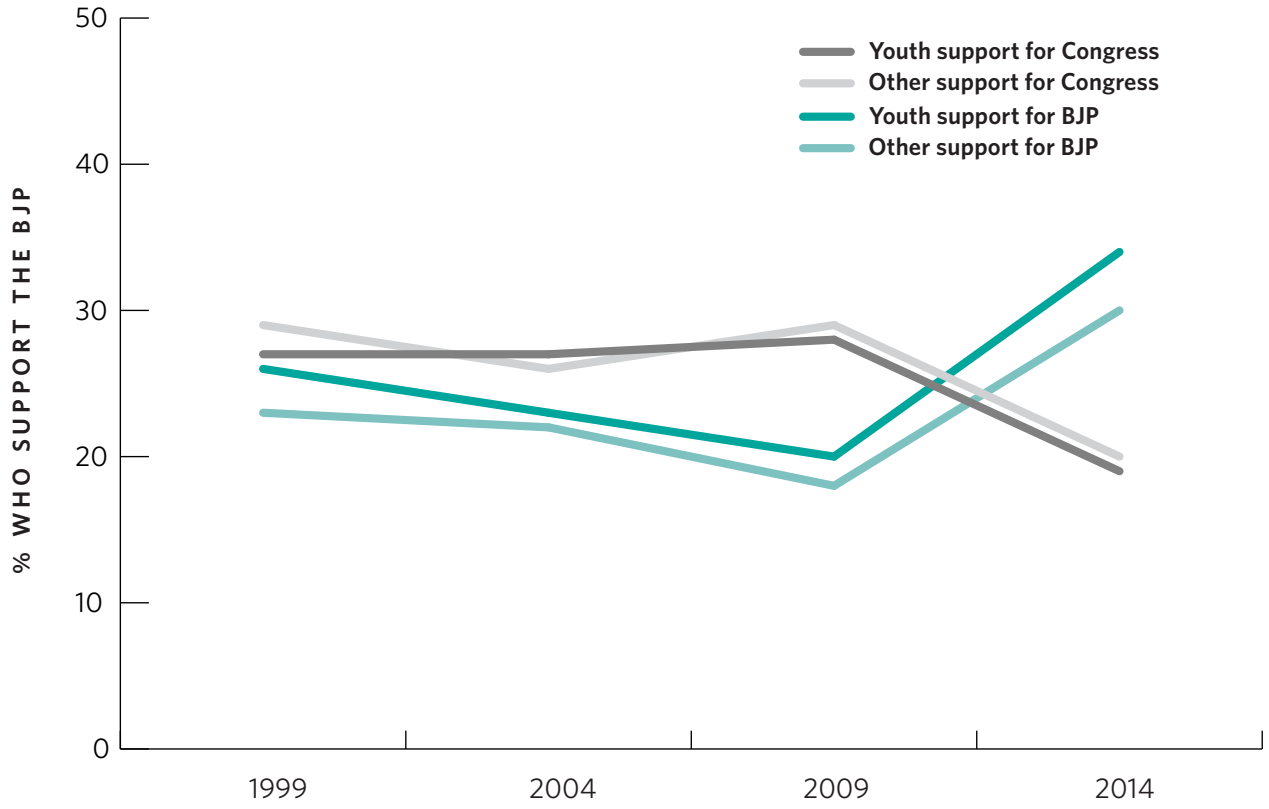
Historically speaking, young Indian voters had not voted in a distinct manner, and their voting behavior has closely resembled overall trend lines, according to CSDS-Lokniti's Sanjay Kumar.[203] That changed in a significant way in 2014 (see figure 5). The 2014 CSDS-Lokniti National Election Study found a distinct preference for the BJP among first-time voters: the BJP secured double the number of votes from young people (eighteen to twenty-two years old) as the Congress Party did.[204] The Congress Party quite clearly suffered an age disadvantage; in the 2014 election, older voters had a greater tendency to support the Congress Party (although significant numbers of voters of all ages reported that they preferred the BJP).[205]

At first glance, this support seems surprising, given that the BJP is associated with more socially conservative positions. But, unlike in the United States, where millennials tend to support the Democratic Party and favor more liberal policies, India's youth are deeply conservative. A 2017 survey of India's youth found that a majority of participants felt that films that "hurt religious sentiments" should be banned. Almost one in two respondents felt that people should not be permitted to eat beef, and half of those surveyed thought capital punishment was worth keeping.[206] When first-time voters (under twenty years old) were asked about the government's top priorities, they ranked two policy matters more highly than other voters: job creation (an expected answer for young people in need of work) and safeguarding the prerogatives of India's Hindu community, a position for which the BJP's affinity is well-known.[207]

But Indian young voters tend to be impatient. A Lok Foundation survey conducted in late 2015 and early 2016 asked voters to share their thoughts on India's economic outlook. Those who had recently voted for the first time displayed a greater tendency to critique the government for failing to enact change, foster enough job growth, provide basic security, preserve societal harmony, or keep the country's borders secure.[208]

FIGURE 5

Youth Support for the Congress Party and the BJP



Source: CSDS-Lokniti Program National Election Studies, 1999–2014.

Note: Young voters are between eighteen and twenty-two years old. The other category includes all voters who are at least twenty-three years old.

At the same time, it is also true that first-time voters tend to base their political views largely on their perceptions of the incumbent governing party when they become politically active. Although young voters have largely supported the BJP, in the 2017 state elections in Gujarat, Modi's home state and one that the party has held for more than twenty years, first-time voters gave more favorable polling numbers for the Congress Party than older citizens did, according to Yashwant Deshmukh of CVoter, an Indian polling agency.[209] When BJP candidates face voters again in 2019, they will be the new incumbents. Although young people eagerly cast ballots for Modi and the BJP in 2014, the party's fall from grace has also been faster among younger voters than older ones. Between 2014 and 2018, CSDS data shows that the share of voters in India's overall electorate who prefer the BJP increased modestly but fell somewhat among first-time voters.[210]

None of this is a major problem for the BJP—yet. The dramatic scale of its 2014 victory ensures that changes in its popularity among subgroups probably will not immediately push it into second place in the 2019 election. The share of first-time voters that support the BJP remains higher than the party's average support among the general public.[211] Yet the Congress Party has

not yet fixed its youth problem despite the elevation of Rahul Gandhi (the heir to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty), as the party has made slower progress in attracting the support of first-time voters than older ones.[212] These findings suggest that, although support among young people for the BJP has declined somewhat, it is still relatively high and they have not yet deserted the party en masse.

"The BJP has created new ideological groupings that support the party beyond traditional caste boundaries [and] attracted new sections of the population amid India's churning demographic changes."

CONQUERING NEW GEOGRAPHICAL FRONTIERS

Another significant hallmark of the BJP's post-2014 surge has been the diverse geographic directions in which the party has spread its reach. BJP governments are now in power in six states in northeastern India, a steep growth curve for a party that had virtually no presence in that part of the country until recently. Overall, the BJP is now in power in seventeen, or more than half of, Indian states.[213] These victories can be credited to the party's concerted push to capture states that had long been written off as unlikely to vote for a party so strongly associated with upper caste north Indian Hindus. It is true that, in a few close elections, the BJP had to urgently cobble together a bloc of allies to form a government, but it has proved itself adept at playing that game.[214]

This strategy has not worked everywhere. For the most part, India's southern states have thus far resisted the BJP. The party was part of the ruling alliance in Andhra Pradesh until its ally, the Telugu Desam Party, pulled the plug on the arrangement in March 2018 over a major policy dispute with the central government. All of the other four southern Indian states (Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana) are administered by non-BJP parties. Moreover, the party seems unable to ingratiate itself with southern voters. Between May 2017 and May 2018, CSDS-Lokniti conducted three nationally representative opinion polls.[215] It found that southern India was the only part of the country that widely preferred the Congress-led UPA to the BJP-led NDA, a gap that has been widening. In opinion polls carried out by CSDS-Lokniti and Axis/*India Today*, the state of Tamil Nadu stands out in its opposition to the BJP and to Modi; in the May 2018 CSDS-Lokniti survey of major Indian states, 75 percent of respondents from Tamil Nadu registered dissatisfaction with the Modi government's performance—the highest of any state.[216]

FUTURE CHALLENGES FACING THE BJP

In India's 2014 general election and in subsequent state contests, the BJP has been wildly successful at reaching out to social groups with which it had not shared a past affinity. In doing so, the BJP has created new ideological groupings that support the party beyond traditional caste boundaries, attracted new sections of the population amid India's churning demographic changes, and adapted itself to be acceptable to India's deeply heterogenous states.

But this fine balancing act has its limits. At the 2019 polls, the BJP will find itself facing at least three major challenges that stem from these unusual coalitions. First, the coalition of upper caste and backward caste groups has cracked wide open thanks to acts of upper-caste violence against lower caste neighbors. The party won the 2014 support of some Scheduled Caste and backward caste groups in part based on a sense that other parties had favored other subcastes at their expense; the rising tide of Modi's personal charisma also helped win over supporters across caste lines. But

a wider narrative of the BJP's disrespect for oppressed communities, if conveyed successfully by opposition parties, could override those calculations.

Second, although Modi has eschewed much direct talk about Muslims, his coded statements, the anti-Muslim remarks of other elected BJP representatives, and the violence orchestrated by Hindutva allies could put off voters who were so attracted by Modi's economic messaging in 2014 that they were willing to look beyond his past communal assertions.

Lastly, given that the BJP managed to attract a wide base of economic conservatives in 2014 who sought high growth and higher incomes, the party's disappointing performance on this front will be difficult to obscure. Modi campaigned on a promise of creating 10 million jobs annually,[217] and the World Bank has indicated that India needs to create at least 8.2 million jobs each year to keep the employment rate constant.[218] According to one credible estimate, the government created just 2 million jobs in 2017.[219] A routine jobs report turned into a national controversy when the government was accused of suppressing it, and when portions of the report were leaked, they indicated record levels of unemployment.[220] Agrarian distress is rife, an economic issue that was pushed into the headlines after more than 100,000 farmers marched into New Delhi in November 2018.[221] There is evidence, both from CSDS-Lokniti's nationwide May 2018 survey and its analysis of the five states that voted in late 2018, that farmers are turning away from the BJP.[222]

Stepping back, it is worthwhile to note that the new coalitions that Modi and the BJP have built in some ways want the same things that many voters do: jobs, higher incomes, and safety from communal aggression and violence. If the BJP is unable to deliver on these fronts, its newfound social coalitions are unlikely to hold firm.

CHAPTER 4

THE FATE OF SECULARISM IN INDIA

CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

At home and abroad, one of postindependence India's defining characteristics is that the nation has managed to sustain democratic governance in the face of striking ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. In the early years after independence, the country's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the ruling Indian National Congress (or Congress Party) advocated for an Indian brand of secularism designed to hold the country's disparate communities together under one roof. Indeed, Nehru often pronounced that India's composite culture was one of its greatest strengths. The Hindu nationalists who later came to populate the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its various ideological affiliates have consistently harbored a starkly different view; they envision India as a majoritarian nation-state, not a multicultural one. The tensions inherent in these competing visions of Indian nationhood have come to the fore in recent years, especially since the BJP's landmark electoral victory in 2014.

To understand these dynamics, it is necessary to define basic concepts and review relevant history. This is because political entrepreneurs who promote ethnoreligious identities—especially Hindu nationalist ideologues—have created much confusion around the notion of secularism, claiming that its proponents have endeavored to make the state hostile or indifferent to religion. That was certainly not the intention of the architects of modern India, whose enemy was not religion, but communalism.

"Whether secularism can maintain its hold as a defining ideology for [India] will depend in part on . . . the BJP's future electoral success and the strategies the opposition adopts to counter the ruling party."

Nationalist forces aside, all is not well with Indian secularism. Even before Hindutva forces began attacking India's secular tradition, the Congress Party had already started undermining secularism by cynically jockeying for the support of different voting blocs and by stoking divisive issues of social identity (a practice known as vote banking). In parallel, the judiciary—especially at the lower levels—has adopted a majoritarian undertone on certain controversial cases. Whether secularism can maintain its hold as a defining ideology for the country will depend in part on a combination of political forces—namely the BJP's future electoral success and the strategies the opposition adopts to counter the ruling party.

HOW INDIAN SECULARISM DEVOLVED INTO POLITICAL PANDERING

At the dawn of India's independence in 1947, advocates of secular nationalism decisively won the debate over how the state should navigate the tricky terrain of India's religious diversity. At the time, there were two other competing visions for how the state should handle religion, namely Hindu nationalism and Hindu traditionalism. The Hindu nationalists held that Indian identity was embodied in Hinduism because Hindus formed the country's majority community and were sons of the soil. By contrast, Hindu traditionalists were less interested in such a stark ethnic view and paid more attention to cultural features, like the defense of traditional Hindu (or Ayurveda) holistic medicine and the linguistic preeminence of Hindi over Urdu, which many Indians regarded as a foreign language.

While Hindu nationalists were almost completely absent from the Constituent Assembly that was charged with drafting the country's constitution, Hindu traditionalists—who formed the right wing of the dominant Congress Party—were well represented. In spite of the pressure they exerted, Nehru and the head of the assembly's drafting committee, B. R. Ambedkar, argued successfully in favor of a form of "composite culture" that, in India, is called "secularism."[223] In the simplest terms, proponents of the secular brand of Indian nationalism define the nation politically, as comprising those who inhabit sovereign Indian territory, and as a place where all citizens are equal.

Although the word "communalism" has largely disappeared from India's modern political lexicon, during the Nehru years, it was widely used to designate ideological forces that sought to divide the Indian nation along religious lines. Nehru believed that Indian secularism was vital because he had seen firsthand how Muslim communalism had resulted in the division of the country (into India and Pakistan) in 1947. For him, the Partition of the subcontinent had not only cut Indian territory in two but had also divided a civilization. Following independence, Nehru considered Hindu communalism to be the country's top enemy; his fears were heightened after Nathuram Godse—a man associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological wellspring of Hindu nationalism—murdered Mahatma Gandhi in 1948.

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, India's secular model seemed to work reasonably well. Religious minorities, including Muslims, remained well-represented in the country's elected assemblies.[224] Furthermore, communal riots were relatively rare at this time; to combat communalism, Nehru sought to prevent Indian politicians from exploiting religion for political gain and sanctioned those who promoted religious polarization. Although it has been unevenly enforced, Section 123 of the Representation of the People Act of 1951, the law that guides the conduct of elections in India, forbids politicians from campaigning on religious themes for this reason.[225]

Notably, Nehru fought against all forms of communalism (whether Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh), not against religion per se. This is evident from the fact that he never intended to separate politics and religion, as happened in the strongholds of *laïcité* (a form of secularism that strictly forbids any government involvement in religious affairs), including France and Atatürk's Turkey. Nehru outlined his views on the subject in 1961, when he said, "We talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for 'secular.' Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it is a state which honors all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities."[226]

Indeed, as political theorist Rajeev Bhargava has argued, Indian secularism has not meant that the government abstains from intervening in religious matters.[227] On the contrary, the state has decisively intervened in religious affairs in certain cases—by banning animal

sacrifices, for instance, and by ensuring that temples are accessible to Dalits (those who occupy the bottom rungs of the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy, and who were once called untouchables).

But Nehru's use of the word "equally" in the quotation above is slightly misleading, as the state has not observed a clear-cut equidistance vis-à-vis each religious community. This is why Bhargava terms India's secular approach as one of "principled distance"—not equidistance.[228] Indeed, the government has sometimes applied different standards to different religious communities. For example, the state reformed Hindu personal laws according to a series of new Hindu code bills without imposing similar changes on religious minorities. Muslims, for instance, were allowed to retain sharia law.

Similarly, the Indian state subsidizes different religious pilgrimages (albeit not necessarily to the same extent), including Sikhs going to Pakistan, Hindus visiting Amarnath Cave in Jammu and Kashmir, and Muslims going to Mecca for the hajj. The state also contributes financially to major religious celebrations such as the Hindu Kumbha Mela; the 2001 festivities in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, cost 1.2 billion rupees (or approximately $25 million).[229] In practice, the concept of principled distance has not meant that the state interferes equally in all religions or to the same degree or in the same manner in all cases.

Starting in the 1980s, Indian secularism came under more severe strain. The Congress Party began opportunistically pandering to one religious community after another more overtly, and Indian secularism was deeply damaged as a result. To begin with, prime minister Indira Gandhi sought to capitalize on religious differences in several blatantly cynical ways. Among other things, she recognized Aligarh Muslim University as a minority institution;[230] promoted militant, secessionist Sikhs like Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to destabilize the Akali Dal, a rival political party in Punjab; and inaugurated the Bharat Mata Mandir, a temple constructed in 1983 with the support of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), also known as the World Hindu Council.

Indira's son, Rajiv Gandhi, added more fuel to the fire when he became prime minister following his mother's death in 1984. In the course of handling the divisive Shah Bano case, he sought to invoke sharia as the template for Muslim communal law in India as a way to mollify Indian Muslims.[231] This political strategy enabled Hindu nationalists to claim that the Congress Party was indulging in pseudo-secularism—a pejorative term that connotes minority appeasement. Having eroded India's tradition of secularism through these actions, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi opened the door for Hindu nationalism to gain more widespread political salience.

HINDUTVA AGAINST SECULARISM: MAJORITARIAN VOTE BANK

In contrast to secularism's political and territorial notion of India, Hindu nationalist ideology, first codified in the 1920s by V. D. Savarkar in *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, defines India culturally as a Hindu country and intends to transform it into a Hindu *rashtra* (nation-state).[232] Hindu nationalists view India as a Hindu nation-state not only because Hindus make up about 80 percent of the population but also because they see themselves as the true sons of the soil, whereas they view Muslims and Christians as products of bloody foreign invasions or denationalizing influences.[233]

The Hindu nationalist organization known as the RSS was born in 1925 in reaction to a pan-Islamist mobilization of Indian Muslims known as the Khilafat Movement. While the Hindu Mahasabha, the right wing of the Congress Party until Savarkar transformed it into a separate party in 1937, engaged in electoral politics even prior to independence, the RSS chose to focus on developing a dense network of local branches and creating front organizations, including a student

union and a labor union. In 1951, the RSS decided it could no longer remain disengaged from electoral politics, so it helped establish a political party, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), in conjunction with former Hindu Mahasabha leaders. The constellation of organizations that the RSS created was called the Sangh Parivar, or "the family of the Sangh."[234] This ideological family shares a brand of pro-Hindu cultural nationalism that deemphasizes Islamic contributions to Indian civilization, even though the formation of India's social fabric and culture involved the mixing of influence from Persia and elsewhere, including in areas like art, architecture, cuisine, and language.

Exploiting the missteps of the Congress Party, Hindu nationalists began accusing it of playing vote bank politics with Muslims. But, at the same time, the RSS played the same card with Hindu voters. Hindu nationalist political entrepreneurs decided to turn the majority community into a vote bank when secular leaders of the Janata Party accused ex-Jana Sanghis of paying allegiance to the RSS. Anticipating the break in the Janata Party that would result in the creation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980, Balasaheb Deoras (the RSS chief at the time) declared in 1979, "Politicians think only of the next election and personal gains for themselves." He went on to say that "Hindus must now awaken themselves to such an extent that even from the elections point of view the politicians will have to respect the Hindu sentiments and change their policies accordingly. . . . Once Hindus get united, the government would start caring for them also."[235]

The launch of the Ayodhya movement must be understood in light of this speech. In the 1980s, the RSS relied on the VHP to mobilize the majority community around the powerful symbol of Lord Ram. Sangh affiliates demanded that the temple that once allegedly stood above Ram's supposed birthplace in Ayodhya should be rebuilt in place of the mosque called the Babri Masjid that had since taken its place. The campaign around a prospective Ram *mandir* (temple) in 1989 resulted in a wave of riots that polarized voters along religious lines. Such polarization helped the BJP win the 1991 state elections in Uttar Pradesh where, in 1992, activists tore the Babri Masjid to the ground to make way for a Ram temple.

The demolition of the mosque was a clear reflection of the Sangh Parivar's anti-secular agenda, which remains its core identity today. For the RSS, turning India into a Hindu *rashtra* necessitates the eradication of so-called foreign influences, as exemplified by the recent rechristening of cities that previously donned Islamic names, like Allahabad (which is now called Prayagraj), and more importantly, the "obliteration" of Islam and its proponents from the public sphere.[236] The actions taken in this regard range from attempts at converting Muslims to Hinduism to preventing interreligious marriages.

A handful of years after the Ayodhya movement, the BJP briefly rose to power in New Delhi in 1998 and won elections again in 1999. On both occasions, however, the party was at the helm of a larger coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), whose other members did not all share a Hindu nationalist agenda. To keep its bloc together, the BJP had to put three of its long-standing policy priorities on the backburner: the construction of a Hindu temple in Ayodhya, the creation of a uniform civil code (or personal law) that applies not only to Hindus but to other religious communities as well, and the abolition of the constitutionally derived autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir—India's only Muslim-majority state.

Although the party diluted its ideology somewhat while in power, the BJP could not hold its coalition intact as some of its NDA partners resented the anti-Muslim pogrom that took place in Gujarat in 2002 during Narendra Modi's tenure as chief minister. The BJP lost the 2004 general elections, and the Congress-led coalition that took over from the NDA, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), returned to a more secular brand of politics, as evident from the appointment of the Sachar Committee to assess the socioeconomic

conditions of the Muslim community,[237] which the report demonstrated was pitiable.[238] While the BJP quickly dismissed the committee report, which recommended specific policy measures to improve the status of the country's Muslim minority, the UPA won national elections again in 2009.

In 2014, for the first time, the BJP won an absolute majority in the lower house of the Indian parliament, the Lok Sabha. Having tasted political power on the national stage for the first time in a decade, the party chose not to resuscitate the three controversial issues mentioned above, but it did pursue actions intended to marginalize Muslims through unofficial channels. For instance, groups of Hindu vigilantes tried to discipline minorities (Muslims and Christians) with the blessing of the state apparatus using a form of cultural policing that had previously been restricted to BJP-ruled states.[239] Indeed, this form of vigilantism has prevailed more in BJP-ruled states like Gujarat or Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, where Yogi Adityanath (a priest and the head of a Hindu sect) became chief minister in 2017 after the BJP's electoral triumph. But it has also spread beyond them.

Such Hindu vigilantism has manifested in a variety of ways. Since 2014, vigilante groups have targeted Muslims accused of seducing and marrying young Hindu women to convert them, a phenomenon some have labeled love jihad. This campaign was followed by the *ghar wapsi (*or homecoming) movement, which aimed to (re)convert Muslims and Christians to the Hindu faith as a reaction to Muslim and Christian proselytism. The issue of cow protection was an even more effective way of organizing activists, who formed a new movement called Gau Raksha Dal. This militia patrolled highways to ensure that Muslims were not taking cows to slaughterhouses; the group was related to the Sangh Parivar and functioned much like the Bajrang Dal—a powerful militia that was created in 1984 during the heyday of the Ayodhya movement.[240]

For all these groups, the BJP's rise to power in 2014 was an inflection point: they no longer needed to fear police retribution and, in some cases, even became incorporated into the state apparatus.[241] In the state of Haryana, Gau Raksha Dal–affiliated groups—armed with field hockey sticks—patrol the highway linking Chandigarh and New Delhi, where they inspect trucks (often with the blessing of the state police) likely to be transporting cows.[242] In Maharashtra, the government has created a new civil service position, called honorary animal welfare officers, in each district. All of the applicants for these posts (whose files have been made public) are *gau rakshaks* from various militias that regularly intercept alleged traffickers and burn their cargo.[243] In several cases, these vigilantes have intercepted and brutally killed Muslim truck drivers who are ferrying cattle.[244] Not only have the police rarely arrested the guilty parties (even when witnesses have provided testimony), but even when they have done so, trials have often gone nowhere.

The cultural policing of Hindu vigilante groups, who pay allegiance to the RSS, shows that India has, to some extent, become a de facto Hindu *rashtra*. The influence of the Sangh Parivar at the grassroots level grows with the tacit support of the BJP-dominated state apparatus: while Hindutva forces may indulge in illegal actions, they are often viewed as the legitimate embodiment of majoritarian rule.

HAS SECULARISM BECOME A DIRTY WORD?

Since the 2014 election, surging Hindu nationalism has put the Congress Party—and secularism, more generally—on the back foot. Many Indian scholars have concluded that the BJP is now the new hegemon of Indian politics. The growing consensus seems to be that Hindu nationalism has gained traction at the expense of secularism to the point of being viewed as the only legitimate stance an electorally successful nationwide political party can take.[245] The attitude of

the Congress Party lends itself to such an interpretation too, at least up to a point, as the party at times has sought to downplay its secularist roots and embrace pro-Hindu sentiments.

Over the last two years, the Congress Party has indulged in what some observers derisively have called "soft Hindutva," emulating the kind of religiosity that is typically associated with the BJP.[246] During recent state election campaigns in Gujarat (2017) as well as Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan (2018), Rahul Gandhi took the unusual step (for him) of visiting dozens of temples.[247] He presented himself as a *Shiv bhakt* (disciple of the Hindu god Shiva), displayed his *janewara* (a sacred thread worn by upper caste Hindu males across their torso), and let his entourage discuss his Brahmin background as well as his *gotra* (clan) in response to BJP leaders who repeatedly brought up the Italian heritage of his mother, former Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi.[248]

Beyond optics, Congress has begun flirting with some of the BJP's favorite campaign themes. For instance, the party manifesto in Madhya Pradesh promised to build *gaushalas* (cow shelters); develop the commercial production of *gaumutra* (cow urine) and cow dung—the former is used in traditional Hindu medicine while the latter is used as fuel or fertilizer; promote the Ram Van Gaman Path (the path that Lord Ram took during his exile from Ayodhya); pass laws that would conserve India's sacred rivers; and promote Sanskrit.[249] The deputy speaker of Madhya Pradesh's Vidhan Sabha (state assembly) and manifesto committee chair, Rajendra Singh, admitted that the Congress Party was adopting this platform in response to BJP pressures: "The BJP used to brand us as [a] Muslim party. It's a conscious decision to shed that tag thrust on us by our rivals."[250]

As a result, the Congress Party's state manifesto differed vastly from the previous iteration issued in 2013. Five years ago, the party devoted a whole section to the "minority community" (a reference mainly to Muslims), a section in which it promised to furnish special economic assistance for *madrasas*, a new law to curb communal violence, and the implementation of the Sachar Committee recommendations.[251]

The Congress Party's pro-Hindu trend is reinforced by the party's strategy in terms of ticket distribution. At first glance, the Congress Party seems to be fielding few Muslim candidates in elections. In the 2014 general election, it nominated only twenty-seven Muslim candidates for the Lok Sabha elections, a paltry 5.6 percent of its total candidates.[252]

But this underrepresentation of Muslim candidates needs to be qualified at the state level: the Congress Party has nominated very few Muslims to vie for state assembly seats in critical states such as Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu (see table 1). But in other states, the proportion of Congress-affiliated Muslim candidates approximated or exceeded the proportion of Muslims in the general population, including in Assam (23 percent), Bihar (24 percent), Kerala (16 percent), Uttar Pradesh (19 percent), and West Bengal (33 percent).[253]

In all these states, with the exception of Assam, the percentage of Muslim candidates fielded by the Congress Party has increased recently. In fact, it is only in two-party states where the Congress Party faces off against the BJP that the party seems to have made a strategic decision to nominate fewer Muslims on the grounds that the minority community has no other choice but to vote for the Congress Party if it hopes to defeat the BJP.

The underrepresentation of Muslims among Congress candidates needs to be qualified in at least two other ways. First, the BJP's underrepresentation of Muslims is far more significant.[254] Second, historically speaking, the Congress Party has never nominated many Muslim candidates, even under Nehru and Indira Gandhi, largely because of the steady influence of Hindu

TABLE 1

Muslim Share of Congress Party Candidates in Select State Assemblies

	1962–1967	1980–1983	1996–2001	2012–2016	2017–2018
Andhra Pradesh	6.3	3	2.7	3.1	-
Assam	17.5	25.7	22.2	22.9	-
Bihar	10	12.9	15.4	24.4	-
Delhi	-	5.5	8.6	8.7	-
Gujarat	5.8	8.2	5.6	4	4
Haryana	1.3	3.4	2.2	1.1	-
Karnataka	-	8.1	8.1	8.5	7.8
Kerala	-	5.7	6.8	16	-
Madhya Pradesh	3.5	3.7	2.2	1.7	1.3
Maharashtra	4.5	7	7.6	6.6	-
Odisha	NA	2	2.8	2	-
Punjab	2.6	1.7	1.9	0.9	1.7
Rajasthan	4.5	7.5	8	8	7.2
Tamil Nadu	-	4.4	0	2.5	-
Uttar Pradesh	0.23	14.1	11.1	16.3	18.4
West Bengal	11.5	13.6	26.7	32.6	-

Source: Social Profile of India's National and Provincial Elected Representatives (SPINPER) dataset, National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Ashoka University, Sciences Po, and Bordeaux University.

Note: This table contains information on India's most populous states. For states that had multiple elections during a given time period, the table displays the simple average.

traditionalists within the party at the state level.[255] But under Nehru and Indira Gandhi (at least until the 1970s), this did not significantly undermine the Congress Party's secular identity.

In fact, over the years, the Congress Party has retained its secular image for several reasons: the secular credentials of many of its top leaders (who often have been more secular than the party cadres and state-level figures); the party's propensity to nominate a large number of Muslims in certain states; and its concern—especially at the top levels—with the socioeconomic conditions and physical security of minority populations. The acid test for measuring the Congress Party's commitment to secularism today has less to do with symbolic gestures (like temple visits) or the representation of Muslims in

assemblies than with concrete public policy. To date, the party has not moved decisively to implement the Sachar Committee report, at least partially due to pressure emanating from the Sangh Parivar. Whether Congress-led governments at the state level will draw inspiration from this report will be one important indicator of how resilient the Congress Party's attachment to secularism actually is.

A second benchmark is the actual well-being of Muslim citizens. In many BJP-ruled states, minorities have felt threatened because of the slayings of Muslims accused of mistreating cows and, to a lesser extent, the harassment of Christian priests or nuns. Whether Congress-run state governments provide security to minorities and restore their trust in state institutions, including the police, will be an important measure of the party's secular credentials. On this front, again, the situation varies from one Congress-ruled state to another, according to the capacity of state leaders to resist pressure from Hindu nationalists.

One notable example of a state where the Congress Party has sometimes succumbed to majoritarian pressures is Madhya Pradesh. After the Congress Party won the 2018 state assembly elections there, the BJP immediately accused the incoming state government of discontinuing the mass recitation of "Vande Mataram" (a patriotic anthem often referred to as India's national song) at the Madhya Pradesh Secretariat on the first day of every month—a practice the BJP had introduced in 2005. The new Congress-affiliated chief minister, Kamal Nath, responded by announcing a "bigger Vande Mataram event" after the BJP president, Amit Shah, had denounced the Congress Party's stance, which he claimed was aimed at "pleasing a particular community" (namely Muslims).[256]

More importantly, the Madhya Pradesh police arrested three Muslims accused of cow slaughter under the National Security Act, a stringent federal law that allows the state to detain people for up to one year without formal judicial proceedings.[257] Interestingly, the officer in charge of the local police station admitted candidly that one of the accused was arrested because of pressure brought to bear by Hindu nationalists: "There was a possibility of communal tension because the Bajrang Dal [an organization of the Sangh Parivar] threatened to take to the street if he was not also arrested. The arrest brought the situation under control."[258]

But not all Congress Party political figures nationwide share this view. The Congress-affiliated deputy chief minister in Rajasthan, Sachin Pilot, disagreed openly with this attitude, arguing: "It is fine to protect animals that are sacred and I believe in that too, but I think we could have done a better job by prioritising those issues first [including "the dignity of fellow human beings"] and then taken on the cow issue."[259] Such discordant voices offer a good illustration of the traditionally multifaceted character of the Congress Party regarding secularism.

While the ideological stances of Congress Party officials have often differed state by state, the contrast between the secular attitude of the top leadership of the Congress Party and the Hindu traditionalism of local party bosses has been evident since the 1950s. This dichotomy was well illustrated by divergent views within the Congress Party on the Sabarimala controversy. In September 2018, the Supreme Court decided to lift the ban on women of any age entering the Sabarimala temple in Kerala.[260] Prior to the court's ruling, women of reproductive age could not enter the temple because Lord Ayyappa (the god to whom the temple is dedicated) had made a vow of celibacy.

Congress Party leaders in Kerala opposed the court's ruling, much like the BJP did, in the name of defending Hindu traditions. At first, Rahul Gandhi openly contradicted his state party's stance in the name of equality.[261] After several months of agitation—mainly by BJP leaders in Kerala[262]—however, Gandhi diluted his position, saying that he was not "able to give an open and shut position on this [question]," as he could "see validity in the argument that tradition needs to

be protected . . . and that women should have equal rights."[263]

Whether the Congress Party leadership will impose a coherent line remains to be seen, but its ambivalence toward secularism will not only depend on the popularity of Hindu nationalism. Indira Gandhi indulged in similar ambiguity, and the current iteration of the Congress Party is probably not compromising its secularism any more than Indira Gandhi did in the early 1980s.

While the extent of the Congress Party's commitment to secularism needs to be qualified, regional parties—which have generally represented one out of every two voters in Indian general election for decades[264]—follow contrasting (and sometimes complicated) trajectories. For instance, leaders of regional heavyweights like the Janata Dal (United), the Biju Janata Dal, the Lok Janshakti Party, and the Telugu Desam Party have oscillated between secular discourse and not-so-secular practices. Some of them left the BJP-led NDA coalition after violence surfaced against Muslims and Christians, but these parties have rejoined the BJP alliance when it has suited them politically. Other regional parties—such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist),[265] the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Samajwadi Party, the All India Trinamool Congress, and the Bahujan Samaj Party continue to strenuously defend minority rights and nominate Muslim candidates in large numbers in the name of secularism.[266] That said, the records of many of these parties are not unambiguous either: witness the Samajwadi Party's mismanagement of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots in Uttar Pradesh, in which dozens of locals lost their lives.[267]

JUDICIAL FORAYS INTO MAJORITARIANISM

In addition to the Congress Party, another major institution that has defended secularism in the past but whose operations deserve fresh scrutiny is the judiciary, whose attitudes in recent years have also become more ambivalent. The delicate balance of secularism in India can only be maintained if the rule of law prevails and enables every citizen to feel equal to others, irrespective of community. For that to be true, a watchful judiciary without the taint of religious bias or motivation is required. While the Supreme Court remains the most important Indian institution in this respect, its sometimes contradictory decisions and the communal overtones espoused by some lower judiciary officials have contributed to the erosion of secularism.

The Ayodhya affair is perhaps the best illustration of this dynamic. After the Babri Masjid was destroyed in 1992, the Indian government appointed a one-man commission led by former Supreme Court justice Manmohan Singh Liberhan. The resulting report, which took seventeen years to complete and whose contents were finally leaked to the media, assigned responsibility for the demolition of the mosque to clearly identified Hindu nationalist figures.[268] To date, however, the judicial branch has not asked the government to table the report in the parliament or to file charges. This delay suggests that trying Hindu nationalists in this case is seen as too politically sensitive.

While the Liberhan report continued to languish, the Allahabad High Court continued to examine the arguments of the Muslims and Hindus who claim that the disputed site where the mosque was built belongs to them. In 2010, the court finally issued a contentious ruling that reflected the divisions between the judges involved.[269] One of the three justices, who dissented, sought to give all the disputed land to the case's Hindu parties on the basis of his reading of relevant Hindu mythology. The remaining justices, one of whom was Hindu while the other was Muslim, penned a majority judgment that was convoluted to put it mildly.

The majority ruling accepted the premise that the demolished mosque had been located on Ram's birthplace, where there had once been a Ram temple, but the authors admitted that no archeological evidence

"Hindu nationalism is depriving India of one of its main assets, at a time when countries around the world are struggling to cope with religious diversity."

had ever been submitted to substantiate this claim. Rather than rebuilding the mosque as many Muslim groups had requested, the two Allahabad justices sought to divide the land between the case's Muslim party (one-third) and its Hindu parties (two-thirds); the ruling also gave the Hindu side the most holy plot of land beneath where the mosque's dome had been.[270]

In delivering its complex judgment, the Allahabad High Court contravened Supreme Court precedent. In late 1992, the incumbent Congress government had asked the Supreme Court to look into whether "any Hindu religious structure" had existed on the land before the Babri Masjid had been built.[271] In 1994, the court responded that it couldn't adjudicate such questions of religious belief.[272] More than a decade and a half later—in 2010—both Hindu and Muslim litigants who were disappointed with the Allahabad High Court's verdict appealed to the Supreme Court. In May of the following year, the higher court ruled that the lower court had issued a "strange" judgment. Nine years later, the matter is still pending.[273]

In this and other instances, India's Supreme Court increasingly has had to remind the country's various high courts of fundamental secular principles as the lower courts have become more inclined to indulge in Hindu majoritarianism. For instance, the murder of a young Muslim man in the city of Pune offers a clear example of these tensions. Mohsin Shaikh, a young engineer, was coming back from the mosque when he was killed by a group of Hindu activists who had just attended a meeting of a group called the Hindu Rashtra Sena that was organized to protest social media posts depicting derogatory images of Shivaji (a historical Hindu warrior king) and Bal Thackeray (the founder of the nationalist party known as the Shiv Sena, a steadfast BJP ally).

Again, the influence of majoritarian Hindu sentiments seems evident. The local court ruled that Shaikh had been attacked "because he looked like a Muslim," and his twenty-three assailants were arrested and accused of murder. But the Bombay High Court, which heard the case on appeal, freed some of them on bail for the following reason: "The fault of the deceased was only that he belonged to another religion. I consider this factor in favour of the applicants/accused. Moreover, the applicants/accused do not have criminal record and it appears that in the name of the religion, they were provoked and have committed the murder."[274] The Supreme Court later overruled the high court and pointed out that "the fact that the deceased [Mohsin] belonged to a certain community cannot be a justification for any assault much less a murder." The Supreme Court requested that high court justices be "fully conscious of the plural composition of the country while called upon to deal with rights of various communities."[275]

These examples suggest that, although the Supreme Court has generally tried to remain faithful to the secular character of the Indian Constitution, lower courts have occasionally espoused Hindu majoritarian viewpoints. As far as the judiciary is concerned, the Supreme Court is arguably one of the last reliable custodians of India's secularism, and its attitude vis-à-vis high-profile cases such as the Ayodhya case going forward will be scrutinized even more closely.

CONCLUSION

Indian secularism is not simply the invention of India's post-1947 political leaders; the concept has a longer, distinguished place in the history of Indian civilization. For millennia, some rulers have promoted the

coexistence of India's religious communities. Emperor Ashoka did so, in spite of his zealous adherence to Buddhism, and the Mughal Emperor Akbar went even further by initiating a syncretic creed—a tradition that culminated in Gandhism. In fact, Indian secularism is the by-product of a whole civilization, as a senior literary figure, Nayantara Sahgal, remarked recently: "We are unique in the world that we are enriched by so many cultures, religions. Now they want to squash us into one culture. So it is a dangerous time. We do not want to lose our richness. We do not want to lose anything . . . all that Islam has brought us, what Christianity has brought us, what Sikhism has brought us. Why should we lose all this? We are not all Hindus but we are all Hindustani."[276]

By countering this worldview and the secular political culture that has emerged from it, Hindu nationalism is depriving India of one of its main assets, at a time when countries around the world are struggling to cope with religious diversity. For instance, French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe has indicated that his country may have to reform its famous 1905 law codifying *laïcité* (the country's strict conception of secularism, which forbids government involvement in religious affairs) to make room for religion in the public space again, after the recent growth in the number of French citizens who practice Islam.

Despite the apparent ascendance of Hindu nationalism under the BJP, however, it may be premature to conclude that this brand of nationalism has established undisputed hegemony over Indian politics and society. In fact, secularism may indirectly benefit from the reactivation of caste identities, which often can undermine religious identities. In the run-up to India's 2019 general election, even the BJP has tried to exploit caste identities by introducing new positive discrimination (affirmative action) policies.[277] For citizens from less privileged economic backgrounds who belong to the general category (that is, primarily the upper castes or those untouched by existing state quotas), Modi announced in January 2019 a 10 percent quota for educational institutions and civil service posts. In addition, the BJP government in Maharashtra has supported the idea of reservations for Marathas (a dominant caste of farmers).[278] The fact that a party that has consistently claimed that caste politics serve to divide the nation has decided to play this card too is a sign of this strategy's resilience.

In the years ahead, caste politics may well gain momentum at the expense of Hindu communalism and indirectly contribute to a more secular approach to politics by dividing the pan-Hindu coalition that the BJP depends on for its majority. This development is all the more likely to be the case if class considerations (such as the country's urban/rural divide) become more salient. Such developments would probably bring social and socioeconomic issues back to the fore and could serve as a counterweight to resurgent Hindu majoritarianism.

CHAPTER 5

HINDU NATIONALISM AND THE BJP'S ECONOMIC RECORD

GAUTAM MEHTA

Addressing the global business elite at the 2018 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi placed India firmly in the camp of globalization and free trade. Echoing a speech delivered by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the same forum a year earlier, Modi suggested that India could be a standard-bearer for globalization and provide global leadership for trade liberalization. Touting the "radical liberalization" of the country's foreign direct investment (FDI) regulations, Modi had boasted in 2016 that India was "the most open economy in the world for FDI."[279]

But not all members of the Sangh Parivar—the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliate organizations, of which Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is one—shared the prime minister's enthusiasm for foreign investment. The Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM), an economic affiliate of the historically protectionist RSS, vehemently opposed liberal FDI norms, arguing that "FDI has done more bad than good to the economy."[280] The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), the RSS's labor union affiliate, has contended that economic reforms have led to "jobless growth" and an "increase in [the] trade deficit," and has demanded that the government should "stop forthwith the economic and labour reforms based on [l]iberalisation, [p]rivatisation and [g]lobalisation."[281] The degree of government intervention in economic activity, especially the role of foreign investment, has emerged as a major fault line within the Sangh Parivar and between the BJP and other members of the Sangh.

The Sangh's protectionist reputation notwithstanding, the leadership of the RSS—which serves as the ideological fountainhead for the entire Hindu nationalist movement—has been content to let multiple points of view coexist, preferring to mediate the policy differences among the BJP and the RSS's economic affiliates on a case-by-case basis.

The BJP started as a political party with autarkic instincts, supporting foreign investment only in high-tech sectors, a stance illustrated by the pithy slogan "computer chips but not potato chips."[282] Over time, particularly during the tenure of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the party began to favor liberal economic polices—best exemplified by its decision

"There has been a noticeable policy convergence between the BJP and the Sangh on many economic matters."

to abandon a long-standing ideological totem to propose foreign investment in retail.[283] The selection of the business-friendly Modi, who campaigned on a platform of welcoming foreign investment and who was less enamored with the virtues of small, family-run businesses, suggested that the BJP was evolving into a more conventionally center-right political party, and that the party was moving away from the statist and autarkic proclivities of the Sangh.

The RSS's own economic ideology, which has often been caricatured as "communism plus cow," has also evolved.[284] While the RSS has softened its once implacable opposition to globalization and economic liberalization, its current economic philosophy is best summed up as populism with Indian characteristics. The RSS's economic populism entails a tilting of the economic playing field in favor of small businesses, which the organization believes are upholders of traditional norms of morality and for whom workers' welfare is at par with pecuniary considerations. The RSS emulates Western populist parties in its aversion to globalization and to foreign cultural influences. Yet the RSS's belief that it is an individual's *dharma* duty to imbue consumption with morality and to share his or her wealth with less privileged citizens lends the RSS's brand of populism a distinctive Indian character.

But political exigencies, as the case studies below demonstrate, and pressure from the Sangh has helped push the BJP government's economic policies in a more populist direction, especially in the last two years of its tenure. The increased convergence between the Sangh's economic populism and the government's own policies—exemplified, most recently, by a government decision that would hinder the e-commerce operations of Flipkart (a company majority-owned by Walmart) and Amazon—led the BJP to dilute, deemphasize, or even abandon some of its more market-friendly campaign promises.

Still, the influence of the Sangh on the BJP is not unidirectional. In many cases, Sangh affiliates certainly do shape government policy. In other instances, the BJP government itself has influenced the thinking of its fellow travelers within the Sangh, bringing them closer to its point of view. Furthermore, even in instances when the RSS and the Sangh have had a material impact on policy formulation, not all of these policy changes have ultimately been adopted. The influence of the Sangh, while potent, must still contend with contextual factors such as domestic politics, foreign influence, and state capacity.

Irrespective of the direction in which this causality appears to run, there has been a noticeable policy convergence between the BJP and the Sangh on many economic matters. This convergence is not only shaping the BJP's 2019 election campaign, but it will also likely define a putative second term for the BJP if the party returns to power. The BJP's 2019 campaign will likely focus less on employment generation and more on expansion of the welfare state, through measures such as an expansive income support for farmers and a publicly financed universal health insurance scheme.

SWADESHI ROOTS OF THE SANGH

For much of its history, the RSS vehemently opposed globalization. The Akhil Bharatiya Karyakarni Mandal (the organization's executive council) declared in 1998 that "it is well known that the [RSS] has always been in favor of *swadeshi* which connotes self-reliance and economic independence."[285] The RSS has long feared that foreign investment would infuse culturally alien values of consumerism and hedonism into the national bloodstream and that globalization would

be accompanied by foreign cultural influences that they believe could lead to a deracination of Indian society.[286] The SJM was established in 1991 to advocate for economic self-sufficiency—the same year India embraced greater economic liberalization, which reduced import tariffs and opened up the economy to greater foreign investment. In a 2018 interview,[287] SJM co-convener Ashwani Mahajan asserted that foreign investment leads to the ceding of economic sovereignty to multinational corporations and the further impoverishment of the poor. The SJM, as the resolution approved at its 2010 national convention makes clear, is particularly wary of the impact of a liberalized trade and FDI regime on small businesses.[288]

Meanwhile, the BMS emerged as a strident opponent of globalization and an advocate of pro-worker labor policies. The union recommended in 2001 that the Indian government pursue economic independence by collaborating with other developing countries to come up with an alternative to the World Trade Organization (WTO). The BMS consistently has opposed proposals by BJP governments that would make it easier for businesses to lay off workers. Similarly, the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), the RSS's farmers' union, has vocally opposed genetically modified (GM) food, likening it to "food colonialism and slavery."[289] Perhaps hyperbolically, the BKS claimed that "the GM nexus [read: multinational corporations] is working against the sustainability of the human race."[290]

In recent years, the Sangh's economic views have evolved. As a (small-c) conservative organization, the RSS has seen its views change in evolutionary, not revolutionary, ways. Historically, the RSS viewed politics as morally corrupting, socially divisive, and inimical to its goal of "unit[ing] the Hindu society" through bottom-up social change.[291] More recently, the RSS has increased its involvement in electoral politics, most prominently during the 2014 elections when the body used its organizational network to help the BJP attain political power. As Dattatreya Hosabale, one of the RSS's joint general secretaries, has noted, the Sangh "would want the BJP to win all the state elections because only then can significant social, political and cultural changes take place in this country."[292]

The recent expansion of the RSS has been driven by an influx of members of upwardly mobile social groups who do not necessarily share the statist and autarkic proclivities of the SJM and the BMS. As such, changes in the RSS's social composition and the electoral imperatives of its political affiliate (the BJP) have softened the RSS's once immutable opposition to FDI. The evolution of the RSS's economic philosophy was evident when Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS's *sarsanghchalak* (chief), declared in 2013 that the RSS was "not bound by dogma."[293] Allaying apprehensions over the organization's alleged antediluvian views, Bhagwat said that the RSS understood that changes in the global economy meant that the organization's viewpoint is "evolv[ing] over time." Unlike in the past, the RSS leadership no longer delivers diatribes against globalization and its malign cultural influence. The RSS's support for the business-friendly Modi as the BJP's prime ministerial contender in 2013 also suggests that it has shed some of its *swadeshi* shibboleths.

The RSS has rejected both capitalism and communism as culturally alien and unsuitable to the Indian milieu. While the RSS shares many of the statist inclinations of the Indian left, the RSS has consistently been wary of an excessive role for the state in shaping society. The RSS's 2015 annual report exhorted the newly elected BJP government to conceptualize the economic development paradigm "in light of Indian values."[294] Bajrang Lal Gupta, an influential RSS ideologue and a former economics professor, argued that India's development framework must be leavened with *dharma* (duty).[295] More specifically, as was evident in Bhagwat's 2017 Vijayadashami speech, which is akin to a State of the Union address for the Sangh Parivar, the RSS's economic populism entails that the economic playing field be tilted in favor of small enterprises. In his speech, Bhagwat called for "decentralized economic production."[296] Expounding on the theme of economic

decentralization, Gupta argued that the family is best suited to be the unit of economic activity and proposed that the economy be organized into self-sustaining "agro-industrial" clusters of ten to fifteen villages with primacy accorded to agriculture and indigenous enterprises.[297]

The RSS's fondness for small family-owned businesses stems from its belief that these enterprises treat employees as an extension of the owners' family, with a concern for employee welfare on par with pecuniary considerations. The RSS's suspicions of large enterprises, even those owned by domestic entrepreneurs, originate from the view that these businesses emulate multinational corporations and promote hedonistic consumption.

Bhagwat's April 2018 speech to Mumbai business elites at the Bombay Stock Exchange was perhaps the clearest enunciation of the latest incarnation of the RSS's economic philosophy. In that address, Bhagwat said that the RSS was not wedded to any economic "isms," and that the yardstick to judge an economic policy should be whether its benefits reach the poor.[298] The RSS has long been a votary of greater welfare spending and economic egalitarianism. Both the SJM and the BMS, which were founded by Dattopant Thengadi—arguably the Sangh's most influential economic ideologue—believe that the ratio of the average incomes of the top relative to the bottom of the income spectrum should not exceed 10:1.[299] The RSS's 2015 annual report exhorts the BJP government to prioritize the needs of rural areas as well as Scheduled Castes (*Dalits*) and Scheduled Tribes (*Adivasis*), two historically disadvantaged minority groups.[300] In addition, Bhagwat has argued that, while Hinduism is not an ascetic faith that frowns on wealth creation, an individual's economic conduct should be mediated by *dharma*. The preoccupation with the individual, which is inspired by the RSS's belief in the durability of bottom-up social change, lends the organization's economic populism a distinctive Indian character. Imbuing consumption with morality, Bhagwat argued that an individual's major goal in life should not be wealth accumulation or sybaritic consumption, and he urged that the rich should share their wealth with other less privileged citizens.

Echoing Bhagwat, an editorial in the RSS's mouthpiece, the *Organizer*, argued that individuals' *dharma* was to use their wealth magnanimously by sharing it with the rest of society.[301] As such, social justice was the responsibility of both individual citizens and the government. In his 2014 Vijayadashami address, Bhagwat asserted that encouraging domestic entrepreneurship is as much the responsibility of individuals as it is of the government.[302] According to this viewpoint, consumers should make sacrifices by purchasing indigenously manufactured products, even if they are more expensive. In its 2011 annual report, the RSS asserted that consumerism and self-aggrandizement were the root causes of corruption.[303]

THE BJP'S ECONOMIC EVOLUTION

The evolution of the RSS's economic philosophy was mirrored by its political affiliate, the BJP. For much of the post-liberalization era, the BJP's *swadeshi* wing was more prominent. As recently as 1996, the BJP's election manifesto, while welcoming foreign investment in high-tech sectors, asserted that "when foreign savings have to supplement and assist the economy in circumstances where domestic savings are inadequate, we compromise with the nation's long-term interests."[304] Much like the RSS, the BJP also supported decentralized production and an economic policy that tilts the playing field toward family-owned small businesses.

The BJP's *swadeshi* wing was gradually sidelined during the tenure of previous BJP prime minister Vajpayee. The governing coalition's dependence on BJP allies for its political survival forced the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government under Vajpayee to sideline contentious cultural issues, including the Sangh Parivar's long-standing goals of constructing a Ram temple

on the site of a demolished mosque in Ayodhya and ending the autonomous status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.[305] Western sanctions on India following the country's 1998 nuclear tests increased foreign investors' risk aversion toward the country and crimped foreign capital inflows.[306] The economic fallout of the Asian financial crisis also required India to undertake deeper structural reforms to attract investment. The BJP's 1999 election manifesto noted that the party "welcomes foreign investment."[307] There were, to be sure, political considerations that drove an evolution in the party's economic ideology—particularly, the BJP's attempt to position itself as a party for India's growing middle class.[308] Much to the dismay of some within the Sangh Parivar, the Vajpayee government opened up sectors such as insurance and media to foreign investment and privatized state-owned enterprises. Expressing his ire, Thengadi called Yashwant Sinha, who was then serving as finance minister, a "criminal" and labeled his policies "anti-national."[309]

When serving in an opposition role, however, the BJP has opportunistically decried further economic liberalization—such as when it objected to the Congress Party's proposed opening of the retail sector to foreign investment. The dynamic shifted once more with the BJP's decision to choose the business-friendly Modi as its candidate for prime minister, which further marginalized the party's *swadeshi* wing. During the election campaign, Modi declared that "government has no business to do business," an assertion that raised the prospects (once he won) that his government might privatize India's often inefficiently run state-owned enterprises—something that had been verboten in Sangh circles since India's economic liberalization in 1991.[310]

The BJP's attitude toward FDI during the 2014 campaign was best summed up by the prime minister's promise of "red carpet, not red tape" for foreign investors.[311] The party's 2014 election manifesto suggested that, unlike the RSS, the party was less enamored with the virtues of family-owned small businesses. The manifesto promised to eliminate fetters for the private sector so that Indian companies could be globally competitive. Much to the consternation of the Sangh Parivar's economic nationalists, the Modi government has increased FDI limits across sectors and eased regulatory burdens on foreign investors, moves that seem to have paid off in the form of a sharp increase in FDI inflows from $36 billion in 2013–2014 to $62 billion in 2017–2018.[312] BJP chief ministers, even those with an RSS provenance such as Haryana's Manohar Lal Khattar, have made attracting foreign investment a key part of their agendas. Certain BJP state governments have implemented business-friendly regulatory changes, including the reform of onerous labor laws.[313] More recently, as the 2019 general election has approached, political expediency as well as pressure from the Sangh have shifted the government's policies in a more populist direction in some cases.

EVALUATING THE SANGH'S INFLUENCE

Over the past decade, the discourse over economic policy within the Sangh Parivar shifted from bromides against cultural colonialism and a nebulous foreign hand to more pragmatic policy analysis, with various economic affiliates playing a critical role. Over the past decade, the expansion of the Sangh has largely come from growth in the membership of RSS affiliates—the BJP, most prominently, but also the economic affiliates such as the BMS, the BKS, and the SJM.[314] The economic affiliates have been a means for the Sangh to penetrate different facets of India's associational life and reach out to nontraditional constituencies. However, contrary to the popular assertions made by certain Indian media outlets, the Sangh Parivar is only one of the voices that shape government policies.

Three policy cases—land acquisition legislation, royalties for GM seeds, and the government's November 2016 demonetization push—help illustrate which mechanisms the Sangh Parivar uses to influence

BJP government decisions and how the latter seeks to shape the former's thinking as well. These cases and some recent decisions by the government help explain, at least in part, the government's recent shift toward economic populism—a convergence that is shaping the BJP's 2019 election campaign. The more recent decisions of the BJP government bear an unmistakable stamp of Sangh Parivar ideology, although it would be churlish to deny that the government's thinking has also been shaped by contextual factors such as domestic politics and international influence—often leading to policy dissonance.

Land Acquisition

Economists have long argued that the cost and difficulty of acquiring land is a significant impediment to rapid industrialization, a key part of Modi's Make in India initiative. Some background on the history of eminent domain in India provides a useful context for understanding how Modi's government attempted (but ultimately failed) to amend India's land acquisition law. While the particulars of how and to what extent the RSS shaped the BJP government's attempt to rework the ultimately unsuccessful land acquisition bill are shrouded in secrecy, it is evident that the RSS and its Sangh affiliates were an important constituency whose suggestions factored importantly in the government's decisionmaking during the policy process.

Prior to 2013, the eminent domain powers of the Indian government were regulated by colonial-era laws that were prone to favoritism and abuse.[315] The political backlash against the abuse of the government's powers prompted the previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to pass legislation that proscribed eminent domain powers from being used to acquire land for private companies and increased compensation to landowners in cases of involuntary land acquisition.

By 2014, it was clear that the safeguards in the UPA-passed land acquisition law, however well intentioned, were making the process of acquiring land for industrial use and infrastructure cumbersome and costly. In late 2014, the new BJP government issued an ordinance—a presidential decree—to jumpstart the process of amending the law to speed up the acquisition of land for public purposes, such as infrastructure.[316] While the impact that the presidential decree had in terms of speeding up industrialization in India is debatable, the proposed legislation by parliament that followed was perceived as a signal of the new government's reformist credentials. The BKS, the RSS's farmers' union affiliate, disagreed with the original amendments that the BJP government put forth, which it portrayed as antithetical to farmers' interests.[317] Other RSS economic affiliates, the BMS and the SJM, also opposed the legislation, which they perceived as favoring large corporates at the expense of farmers. Although the government's efforts to change the law in the end failed, this case is nonetheless an apt lens for examining the manner and mechanisms through which the Sangh Parivar influences government policy.

The RSS leadership intervened to mediate the differences among its affiliates. Hosabale, whose influence is greater than his position in the leadership hierarchy would suggest, said that the RSS affiliates should bridge their differences "in a spirit of coordination and not confrontation."[318] Recognizing the Modi government's imperative to ensure growth and generate employment rapidly, an RSS leader defended the move: "[The] BJP's whole development promise hinges on land acquisition. If the party is unable to push it, it will end up cutting a sorry figure. More so, if the problem is posed by the Parivar's own organisations."[319]

To bridge the differences among various RSS affiliates over the land acquisition issue, representatives of the BKS met Amit Shah (the BJP's president), Ramlal (the RSS *pracharak*, a full-time worker who is also a general secretary of the BJP and the liaison between the RSS and its political affiliate), and Ram Madhav (a former RSS *pracharak* who was seconded to the BJP as its general secretary) in a meeting brokered by

the RSS. The government subsequently included nine amendments to the land acquisition legislation, many of which incorporated suggestions from the BKS and other RSS affiliates.

The BKS diluted its public opposition to the BJP's proposed changes to the land acquisition law after some of its suggested changes—a requirement to obtain the consent of at least 80 percent of landowners for the government to acquire land on behalf of private parties and mandatory social impact assessments—were incorporated in the legislation.[320] Later, the BKS compromised even further, agreeing to lower the minimum consent threshold to 51 percent and abandon the idea of social impact assessments altogether.[321]

Unfortunately for the government, it lacked a numerical majority in the upper house of the Indian parliament and, due to implacable resistance from the opposition, had to abandon its efforts to pass a national legislation to speed up land acquisition. In the end, while the Sangh did shape the government's approach, the BJP could not round up sufficient support from the opposition to push the bill through parliament.

The ultimately futile efforts to amend the land acquisition law made Modi more circumspect in implementing radical economic reforms. Chastened by its inability to ease land acquisition norms, the Modi government adopted a more incremental approach to factor market reforms. The Modi government's retreat was hastened by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's jibe that it was a "*suit boot ki Sarkar*" (government of the rich and the corporates).[322] Despite the fact that the Congress had been badly weakened in the 2014 polls, this taunt had political resonance, which was evident from the BJP's losses in subsequent state assembly elections in Delhi (February 2015) and Bihar (November 2015).

The case of the land acquisition bill exemplifies an important distinction in the RSS-BJP relationship during the tenure of Vajpayee and Modi. During Vajpayee's tenure, the BJP-RSS relationship was often acrimonious with disagreements spilling out onto the streets.[323] The relationship has been much more cordial during Modi's government, partly because of the implicit bargain that the BJP provides a forum for the RSS's affiliates to provide feedback on government policies as a way to minimize a public airing of disagreements. The forums have often allowed RSS affiliates to shape BJP policy, as the case of pricing of GM seeds illustrates, even if their recommendations are not uniformly adopted or implemented.

Genetically Modified Seeds

The SJM has also had unheralded, albeit modest, success in pressuring the Modi government to temporarily seek to impose regulatory restrictions on GM seeds through price controls, although the government later opted to reverse course. This is significant because previously, when he served as chief minister of Gujarat, Modi was enthusiastic about GM technology. For a time, this viewpoint carried over into his tenure as prime minister, as Modi asserted that "India has the potential to become a major producer of transgenic rice and several genetically modified or engineered vegetables."[324]

By contrast, the SJM has been a longtime crusader against GM crops and has even collaborated with ideological adversaries of the Sangh to lobby against regulatory approvals of GM seeds. Mahajan, the SJM's co-convener and the organization's public face, has questioned the "so-called science" behind GM foods, casting aspersions on both their efficacy and their safety.[325] The SJM and the BKS joined Nuziveedu Seeds, an Indian agricultural inputs company, in opposing the pricing policies of Monsanto, the patent holder for GM cotton seeds.

Prabhakar Kelkar, the vice president of the BKS, remarked that it was "important for all of us to unite to wage a war against Monsanto . . . for [the] greater good."[326] The BKS lobbied Radha Mohan Singh, India's union minister of agriculture and a longtime RSS

member, to cap the royalty rates and in effect prevent Monsanto from selling GM seeds with the latest technology in India. Partly because of lobbying by RSS affiliates, the government imposed price caps on the royalty for GM cotton seeds, slashing the amount by around 70 percent, disregarding Monsanto's threat to re-evaluate its business in India.[327] Kelkar said the RSS pushed for Singh to act against Monsanto "because we all believe in the same agenda."[328]

Only after the intervention of senior U.S. government officials did the Modi government suspend its decision to cap royalty rates for GM cotton seeds. Although the cap on Monsanto's royalty rates was reversed, the Indian government's decision to acquiesce to lobbying by RSS affiliates, even at the cost of sullying the government's investor-friendly reputation, demonstrates that the RSS and its affiliates do hold real sway on economic and commercial policy matters, even when its preferences are not always enacted at the end of the day. It ultimately took the weight of U.S. government lobbying to get New Delhi to reverse course.

Demonetization and the Goods and Services Tax

In November 2016, Modi made the surprising decision to demonetize approximately 86 percent (by value) of all Indian currency.[329] The demonetization campaign is widely regarded by many economists to have been a failure.[330] In promoting the move, the government argued that the draconian measure would flush out black money, curb counterfeit currency, and significantly curtail the use of cash in the economy. Evidence to date suggests that the policy has largely failed to achieve these objectives.[331] These arguments notwithstanding, the Sangh Parivar still largely supports it. While the provenance of the idea of demonetization remains murky, some commentators have posited that S. Gurumurthy, an RSS ideologue and co-convener of the SJM, had a role in advising Modi to implement this disruptive measure.[332] Despite recognition of the hardships created by demonetization, especially among the small-scale traders who once constituted the core of the organization's support base, the RSS believed the move was in the long-term interests of the economy.[333] Gurumurthy himself has gone on record to say that demonetization saved the economy from "collapse"; the withdrawal of high-value currency notes helped to reduce asset prices that were fueling "fake growth."[334]

Coming closely on the heels of demonetization, the introduction of the goods and services tax (GST) compounded the disruptions to the unorganized sector of the Indian economy's supply chains. The GST unified the array of indirect taxes into a single unified value-added tax, a change that had the further benefit of increasing the efficiency of interstate commerce. Higher compliance costs for small family-run businesses aroused the ire of parts of the Sangh, with both the SJM and the BJS opposing provisions of the GST that they believed would put such family-run businesses at a competitive disadvantage.[335]

In formulating and rolling out the demonetization and GST policies, both the BJP government and the Sangh took pains to accommodate each other's interests and concerns. The Sangh opted to support a policy that some of its affiliates had deep reservations about, while the BJP government conveyed its openness to addressing at least some of the Sangh's concerns. Within a week of Bhagwat's critical 2017 Vijayadashami speech, the central government reduced the GST on some common household items and lessened the GST compliance burden on small businesses.[336] The government's 2019 budget further eased GST compliance on small businesses by increasing the GST threshold.[337] The Sangh Parivar's (albeit reluctant) acquiescence to demonetization and the GST demonstrates not only its recent political pragmatism but also the degree to which its support base has expanded from small traders and North Indian trading communities.

CONCLUSION

Over the past year, the RSS has leveraged India's changing political context to nudge the BJP government in a more economically populist direction, although these efforts have not been unambiguously successful. In many cases, government policy bears the RSS's imprint, but these positions have not always been incorporated into the final drafts of legislation or fully implemented. Furthermore, this pattern of influence on economic thinking runs both ways: just as the RSS and Sangh affiliates have helped shape government policy, the BJP too has exerted influence on its Sangh colleagues. While the causal connections are messy—and circular—there is no doubt that the RSS has found a seat at the policy high table for the last five years.

A prominent recent instance of this pattern is the nomination of the SJM's S. Gurumurthy as a director on the central board of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).[338] The RBI board has a limited role in policy decisions and has traditionally served as an advisory body. However, Gurumurthy lobbied the RBI to change regulations that he perceived were choking the flow of credit to small and medium enterprises.[339]

The SJM and other RSS economic affiliates have also supported the repatriation of RBI "excess reserves" to the government, resources that could presumably be used to fund populist welfare measures in the run-up to the 2019 election. The SJM noted in its newsletter that "only [the] central government owns the right over these reserves and profits of the RBI."[340] The ensuing controversy led RBI governor Urjit Patel to quit his position months before the end of his term, further damaging the government's reformist credentials. Among the first decisions of the new governor, Shaktikanta Das, was to allow regulatory forbearance on the restructuring of the overdue loans of small and medium enterprises—a marked reversal of the previous RBI governor's policy against the restructuring of loans.[341]

"The BJP's 2019 manifesto and campaign platform will likely center on an expansion of public spending and a deemphasis on business-friendly appeals."

The Indian government has pursued more populist economic policies on other fronts as well. A month after Modi's celebrated 2018 Davos speech, Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced in his budget speech a "calibrated departure from the underling policy [of reducing customs duty of the] last two decades."[342] In response to the depreciation of the Indian rupee, caused largely by a bout of financial market volatility that has increased investors' risk aversion toward emerging markets, the government further selectively increased import duties, ostensibly to reduce the trade deficit.[343] This change in the government's policy orientation undoubtedly pleased the statist and autarkic wing of the Sangh who blame trade liberalization for India's recurrent trade deficit.[344]

More recently, the proposed tightening of norms—a policy that was met with approbation from the SJM—for e-commerce retailers, which hampers the operations of Amazon and Flipkart (a firm majority-owned by Walmart), flies in the face of the prime minister's promise of a "red carpet" for foreign investors.[345] The increased assertiveness of the Sangh Parivar also caused the government to abandon the prime minister's campaign claim that "the government has no business being in business," instantiated most recently by the scrapped plans to privatize perennially loss-making Air India.[346]

Notwithstanding the Indian finance minister's repeated commitments to fiscal prudence,[347] and in the face of flagging revenues from the newly introduced GST,[348] the Modi government has also proposed an expensive

expansion of the welfare state. Ayushman Bharat (better known as Modicare) seeks to provide health insurance of 500,000 rupees (approximately $7,000 or more than three-and-a-half times India's per capita GDP) to the poorest half of Indian citizens.[349] Similarly, in a decision that reflects skepticism over the efficacy of farm loan waivers from quarters within the Sangh,[350] the Modi government announced an income support scheme for farmers in the 2019 budget to ameliorate the sagging fortunes of the agriculture sector.[351] To be sure, India's dismal human development outcomes and the recent distress in the country's agricultural sector make a strong case for greater public welfare spending. But this policy, too, is reflective of the change in the Modi government's orientation that the last few months of its tenure are focused more on populist concerns.

Much to the chagrin of the party's libertarian-minded supporters, the BJP's 2019 manifesto and campaign platform will likely center on an expansion of public spending and a deemphasis on business-friendly appeals. The BJP's 2014 campaign was centered on the promise to bring *acche din* (better days) to the Indian economy; the next campaign is poised to be more preoccupied with promises of expanding the welfare state and improving the efficacy of welfare delivery.

The RSS, for its part, appears content with the policy direction the Modi government has taken, and this shift could not have come at a better time: the RSS cadres are an important source of help for powering the BJP's formidable election machine. A satisfied, energized cadre will provide a much-needed lift to the ruling party's reelection prospects.

CHAPTER 6

THE BJP AND INDIAN GRAND STRATEGY

ABHIJNAN REJ AND RAHUL SAGAR

INTRODUCTION

When Narendra Modi assumed office as Indian prime minister in the summer of 2014 on the back of an electoral landslide, expectations ran high—but this was not the case in New Delhi's strategic community. As the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s candidate for the post, Modi had led a campaign that principally revolved around reforming governance and rejuvenating the economy, often drawing on his lengthy tenure as Gujarat's chief minister. As Indian scholar C. Raja Mohan put it, "there was little expectation that a provincial leader like Modi . . . would make a big difference to Indian diplomacy."[352]

This pessimism in the run-up to Modi's election was often punctuated by apprehension. Modi previously had been refused a visa to the United States owing to alleged tacit involvement in religious riots in Gujarat in 2002; in addition, he counted Ajit Doval as a close adviser—a former intelligence chief, Pakistan hawk, and the founder of a leading Hindu nationalist think tank. Many observers wondered if Modi's foreign policy would be fundamentally inward-looking and nativist, shaped by the stark worldview of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ideologues like Vinayak Savarkar. Would his election significantly stress India-Pakistan relations? Would his (often self-promoted) image as a Hindu strongman hurt India's ties with the liberal states of Europe and with the United States under then president Barack Obama?

Soon after his election, it became clear that Modi would enthusiastically engage with the world and seek to propel India toward more of a global leadership role. Early on, his government announced that it would transform India into a "leading power."[353] Many commentators went as far as to claim that Modi would significantly alter the very contours that shape Indian foreign policy.[354] In a 2015 speech, Doval, who became Modi's national security adviser, noted that India had to "increase [its] weight and punch proportionately."[355] He framed statecraft as "the battle of civilisations, battle of cultures, basically the battle of minds."[356] Both statements alluded to an Indian strategic posture driven by the pursuit of national strength and international prestige, a vision that sought to restore India's civilizational glory and rightfully secure the country a more prominent place in the international system. Such assertions aligned with the foreign policy views of early Hindu nationalist thinkers.

Despite this rhetoric, five years later, the prime minister has largely highlighted advances set in motion by his predecessors. The picture that emerges around a presumed Modi doctrine is that of inertia tempered by a few distinct innovations. Especially compared to former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Modi has failed

"Absent the cultivation of strength, Modi's vigorous and pragmatic outreach to other countries around the world and his emphasis on civilizational values as a driver of Indian foreign policy ring hollow, privileging optics over substance."

to significantly enhance India's capabilities in terms of increasing the country's latent power by advancing substantive economic reforms or channeling that power toward bolstering India's defense capabilities. Insofar as Modi has emphasized the role of force (which enjoys a privileged place in Hindu nationalist thinking), he has done so to bolster India's self-image, as well as to placate his constituents with an eye toward domestic politics. Absent the cultivation of strength, Modi's vigorous and pragmatic outreach to other countries around the world and his emphasis on civilizational values as a driver of Indian foreign policy ring hollow, privileging optics over substance.

CONCEPTUALIZING INDIA'S WORLD: A LONG HISTORY IN SHORT

Hindu nationalist thinking about India's place in the world can be divided into two broad phases: when Hindu nationalist politicians were on the fringes of the country's political landscape and thus consigned to merely theorizing about foreign policy (from India's independence in 1947 to 1997), as opposed to the periods when they have assumed power and have been in a position to actively shape Indian grand strategy under two BJP-led governments (from 1998 to 2004 and from 2014 to 2019).

Hindu nationalism emerged from a single question: why, in spite of what many domestic Indian observers consider a storied civilization, did Hindus come to be subjugated? Over the century prior to 1947, two distinct answers came to the fore. The first one, elaborated most famously by Swami Vivekananda, blamed India's subjugation on disunity in Hindu society. The other interpretation, exemplified by the work of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (arguably the most influential Bengali intellectual of the nineteenth century), stressed the ruthless nature of international competition whereby the slow and dogmatic succumb to the vigorous and pragmatic.[357]

These disparate diagnoses led to very different conclusions. Convinced that the materialistic and individualistic form of modernity unfolding in the West would weaken rather than strengthen Indian social bonds, Vivekananda advised that religion is the means by which to bind together an otherwise bafflingly diverse society. Chatterjee, by contrast, advised Hindus to do whatever was necessary to succeed in a dog-eat-dog world; much to the chagrin of conservatives, he commended the consumption of wine and beef should these prove essential to success in battle. By 1947, the difference between these intellectual currents had sharpened, as Indian observers were alternately repelled or impressed by the muscular forms of nationalism emerging in Europe and Asia (and in Japan and China, in particular). The Vivekananda-like reaction was epitomized by Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi who denounced modern civilization as self-destructive and instead preached *ahimsa* (nonviolence).[358] On the opposite end of the spectrum stood Savarkar, who denounced Gandhi as dangerously naive and called on Hindus to acknowledge that great power politics is violent and competitive.

Following India's successful bid for independence in 1947, and with the onset of the Cold War, Indian political figures were compelled to translate their ideas into practice. The Indian National Congress (or Congress Party) under prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru advocated a two-pronged approach to international

politics focused on nonalignment and nonviolence. Coalescing under the banner of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), the predecessor of the BJP, Hindu nationalists found it hard to reconcile their two very different intellectual traditions. Under Syama Prasad Mookerjee and especially Deen Dayal Upadhyay, the BJS opposed the Congress Party by insisting that India ought to pursue profitable alliances and rapidly develop its military capabilities. But these BJS leaders could never quite free themselves from their worries that modernity would loosen the only bond that unified Hindus, namely, their religion. Hence, they espoused economic and social policies that sought to protect social stability and moral values rather than foster rapid growth and development.

This commingling led the BJS, and subsequently the BJP, to blow hot and cold when it came to India's capabilities and the prospect of alliances. In the wake of international crises, most noticeably the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union (the latter of which left India bereft of its main security guarantor), many Hindu nationalists called for massive investment in India's defense capabilities and urged the Indian government to leverage bilateral relations with strong economic and military powers such as France, Israel, Japan, and the United States. Yet the Hindu nationalists never explained how their economic and social policies, especially their hostility to foreign capital and technological progress, would generate the economic gains required to make good on these goals, much less make India an attractive partner. Sitting in the opposition benches, the BJS (and later the BJP) were never compelled to take responsibility for their views. Thus, even as late as 1994, leading Hindu nationalists were, for example, simultaneously calling for the development of a nuclear deterrent to counter U.S. hegemony even as they opposed badly needed foreign investment.

THE VAJPAYEE YEARS

The evasiveness that had characterized the BJP's foreign policy positions during the Cold War could not be sustained once the party finally came to power for an extended period for the first time under Vajpayee, who served for two brief stints in 1996 and 1998 before serving out a full five-year term from 1999 to 2004. Examining his strategic record with the benefit of hindsight, it becomes evident that he displayed a unique mixture of resolve and restraint—a focus on hard capabilities that was nonetheless tempered by careful statecraft and pragmatic diplomatic outreach. Three specific instances demonstrate how Vajpayee's national security and foreign policy strategy were markedly different from those of the Congress Party prime ministers beginning with Nehru.

The first and most apparent point of divergence between Vajpayee and what can be broadly termed the Nehruvian paradigm in Indian foreign policy is nuclear weapons. The acquisition of a nuclear arsenal had been a mainstay in Hindu nationalist strategic thinking since the 1950s, even as key advisers to Congress prime minister Indira Gandhi counseled against it.[359] India's underground nuclear test in 1974, dubbed a "peaceful nuclear explosion," paired with Gandhi's decision soon afterward not to extend the nuclear program or develop a fully functional nuclear weapon put India in a surreal position.[360] (The detonation was meant to demonstrate to the world that India could build nuclear weapons if it so chose, even as the country opposed nuclear weapons in general; the choice to halt weaponization of India's thus-demonstrated capability was a result of intense Western pressure. Together, these decisions enforced a position of "nuclear ambiguity" on India's part.[361]) India was subject to Western sanctions for the detonation without obtaining the security benefits that a functional nuclear deterrent would have brought. Meanwhile, then Pakistani prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto exhorted his scientists to "eat grass and build the Bomb," setting in motion India's reactive quest to weaponize its nuclear capabilities.[362]

Vajpayee's interest in nuclear weapons became clear when he first assumed office in 1996 for an abbreviated, ill-fated thirteen-day term.[363] Soon after returning to office in 1998, Vajpayee authorized additional nuclear weapons tests, which were carried out in May of that year. However, his nuclear philosophy, as announced days after the tests, was markedly restrained, as he offered Pakistan an Indian no-first-use pact.[364] Vajpayee took two key steps that operationalized this philosophy. First, soon after the tests, he announced a unilateral moratorium on further nuclear testing. Second, in 1999, India released a draft nuclear doctrine that committed India to an unconditional no-first-use posture and the maintenance of a credible *minimum* deterrent.[365] It is important to note that both ostensible concessions were designed with an ultimately radical intent in mind: to secure India's entry into the global nuclear order on its own terms.

Second, Vajpayee put the role of force front and center in dealing with Pakistan's intransigence. This mentality became most visible in the prime minister's resolve to end the 1999 Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan (over the latter's intrusion into Indian-administered Kashmir) on his own terms, even if that meant significant escalation under the looming shadow of the two country's nuclear arsenals. The Vajpayee government privately told then U.S. president Bill Clinton that India "would not negotiate [with Pakistan] under the threat of aggression," implicitly signaling New Delhi's appetite for escalation.[366] Later, in reaction to a failed 2001 attack on the Indian parliament and a severe attack on an Indian military base in 2002—both traced back to Pakistan-supported groups—Vajpayee ordered one of the largest mobilizations of the Indian Army deployed to the Indian-Pakistan border since 1971, although he did not attack Pakistan.[367] This approach demonstrated a mixture of resolve and pragmatic restraint.

Contrast this approach with the reactions of successive Congress-led governments to terrorist attacks before as well as after Vajpayee's tenure. In 1993, Mumbai was attacked by a criminal syndicate with backing from Pakistan's intelligence services.[368] The Congress-led government under then prime minister P. V. Narasimha Rao chose not to act against Pakistan despite noting that the attacks were part of "an international conspiracy."[369] Fifteen years later, when Mumbai was struck again by Pakistan-based terrorist elements, the refusal of then prime minister Manmohan Singh to retaliate militarily enforced the still-dominant narrative of a Congress Party that is weak on national security.

Third, Vajpayee's outreach to the United States stood in sharp contrast to the views of his predecessors. India's historical nonalignment posture, the Congress Party's foreign policy idée fixe, had often meant keeping Washington at arm's length while enthusiastically engaging Moscow. While Nehru's record showed a certain pragmatic flexibility in relation to the United States—he reached out to U.S. president John Kennedy to seek American military aid as India fought China in 1962, for example—by the 1970s, anti-Americanism had become a signature of Indian foreign policy. While two Congress Party prime ministers, Rajiv Gandhi and Rao, took modest steps to improve Indo-U.S. relations, it was Vajpayee who decisively embraced the United States, famously calling the two countries "natural allies."[370]

Yet his outreach to Washington remained pragmatically subordinate to India's own national interest. While his government offered unconditional support to the U.S. military—including basing and overflight rights—during the 2001 U.S.-led campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Vajpayee refused to do the same for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, going against the recommendation of his own deputy.[371] Autonomy in decisionmaking, the generation of strategic space, and the quest for international multipolarity would remain abiding principles of Vajpayee's foreign policy agenda.

MODI'S FOREIGN POLICY

A Hindu nationalist strategic doctrine truly in line with the intellectual movement's traditional views would emphasize hard power capabilities. As the first BJP prime minister to take the helm since Vajpayee, Modi and his government's record has been most disappointing on this front, as the prime minister has largely highlighted advances set in motion by his predecessors.

When it comes to India's nuclear capabilities and doctrine, Modi's lack of success in doing more than building on the achievements of his predecessors is instructive. For example, India's quest for a nuclear-propelled submarine dates back to the 1970s, and the construction of the country's first nuclear-propelled submarine capable of launching nuclear weapons, the INS *Arihant*, started in 2009 under the Singh government. Still, nuclear weapons do constitute an important factor in the current prime minister's strategic thinking. Modi emphasized the sea-based component of the country's nuclear triad when he addressed the crew of that submarine after it completed its first self-described deterrence patrol in November 2018.[372] And the fact that Pakistan is Modi's raison d'être for Indian nuclear weapons became clear on that occasion when he stated that the successful mission "gives a fitting response to those who indulge in nuclear blackmail."[373]

Having said that, the Modi government has failed to develop a cogent nuclear strategy that addresses doctrinal challenges emanating from Pakistan's acquisition of tactical nuclear weapons. Note that while the 2014 BJP campaign manifesto promised to "study in detail India's nuclear doctrine, and revise and update it, to make it relevant to challenges of current times,"[374] Modi thus far has kept the country's 2003 declaratory nuclear doctrine intact despite speculation to the contrary. There are also no indications that the Indian nuclear arsenal has grown unusually—either in quantity or quality—during his tenure.

The Modi government has not adequately cultivated India's conventional military capabilities either, as efforts to strengthen the country's armed forces remain hobbled by domestic politics and squabbling among the military's three branches. Under Modi, in 2018–2019, India's defense budget fell to just above 1.5 percent of GDP—the lowest such figure since 1962.[375] This financial squeeze has accentuated the existing imbalance between money allocated for the procurement of new weapons and the replenishment of old ones and budgeting for the salaries and pensions of military personnel.

But that is not all. Modi's inability to introduce the transformative economic reforms needed for sustained growth has meant that the Indian economy (the latent base of Indian military power) has not enjoyed significant structural changes. The prime minister's spotty economic record has been riveted by dramatic and questionable measures—such as the fateful decision to abruptly ban more than 86 percent of India's circulating currency (a policy known as demonetization) in 2017—that have deepened the economic challenges India faces.[376] Finally, despite a clear electoral mandate in 2014, Modi has been unable to effectively manage the politics surrounding defense acquisitions. The ongoing controversy about possible graft and favoritism surrounding India's purchase of the French-made Rafale fighter jets serves as a case in point.[377]

In addition, Modi has failed to reform India's lumbering military bureaucracy, which is prone to interservice rivalries. Despite early campaign promises, his government has failed to appoint a chief of defense staff, a precondition to jointness among the Indian military's three branches. Without a single figure to oversee the three services, someone who would have the legal authority to reprioritize military goals as well as emphasize power projection, India's army continues to reign over the country's navy and air force. When the Modi government did set out to reform the country's

national security architecture in 2018, it did so though a series of workarounds that diminished the role of his cabinet and concomitantly emphasized his own office and that of the national security adviser. Meanwhile, a lack of internal cohesion has continued to drain India's military power.

In terms of terrorism emanating from the border with Pakistan, Modi has also achieved few gains in his efforts to deter insurgents and terrorists despite demonstrating the military intent to do so. The more the Indian Army is retooled to serve counterinsurgency functions, the less it is capable of fighting conventional wars. Modi has been unable to make significant progress in resolving the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. When he assumed office, Modi took a muscular take-no-prisoners attitude toward the militancy plaguing that state. However, this hardline approach quickly backfired, as popular support for the insurgents steadily grew until the summer of 2016 when the death of a young militant at the hands of Indian security forces nearly brought Indian-administered Kashmir to a halt with intermittent curfews for around one hundred days.[378] Vajpayee (and to a lesser extent Singh) made serious attempts to resolve the Kashmir imbroglio. In contrast, no single strategic formula on Kashmir that bears Modi's imprint has emerged.

This is noteworthy because the need to resort to arms when required and the lawlessness of the international system that makes such force necessary were persistent themes in the early foreign policy writings of Hindu nationalists. What is especially striking is that, in the minds of many Hindu nationalists, the ability to use force is intricately tied to India's self-image as a nation.[379]

The Modi government has accentuated these precepts in a few highly publicized instances. The first one was a September 2016 attack in which the Pakistan-based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) struck an Indian military base in Uri, a remote town in Indian-administered Kashmir. This strike posed a serious domestic political challenge for Modi. Not responding to the attack would have undermined his muscular image and perhaps (from the BJP's point of view) made him seem as ineffectual as his predecessor on national security. Indeed, soon after the Uri attack, Ram Madhav—a Modi confidante and the BJP's general secretary—called for the end of India's "strategic restraint," a Congress-promoted notion in the eyes of some right-wing Hindu ideologues.[380]

With the twin objectives of assuaging his constituents and signaling to Pakistan that it would not be business as usual in New Delhi, in late September 2016, Modi sent Indian special forces across the Line of Control (LoC)—the de facto border between Indian- and Pakistani-administered Kashmir—to attack several terrorist camps. While it was not the first time that India had carried out such an operation, by publicly avowing the strikes, Modi met both objectives. What was interesting was the subsequent glorification of an admittedly limited military engagement in sync with the Hindu nationalist identification of national self-image and martial prowess. The Modi government announced what was dubbed a National Surgical Strike Day to mark the anniversary of the strikes across the LoC; a movie on the strikes was reportedly endorsed by Modi himself.[381]

Similarly, when JeM attacked Indian paramilitary personnel in Pulwama in mid-February 2019, Modi's decision to retaliate by subsequently targeting terrorist camps in mainland Pakistan signaled resolve. Notably, this was the first time since 1971 that India had used airpower to strike deep into Pakistan (as opposed to Pakistani-occupied Kashmir). However, the Pulwama attack decisively proved that the 2016 cross-LoC strikes were insufficient in deterring terrorist attacks emanating from Pakistan. Furthermore, it is quite likely that Modi's decision to do so was driven as much by domestic politics as by strategic calculations—given that the Pulwama attacks happened just two months before India's impending April–May 2019 national election. Whether the Indian airstrikes of February

2019 fundamentally change Pakistan's posture of supporting terrorism in India remains to be seen.

Beyond the issue of wielding hard power to advance India's national security, Modi's foreign policy has been broadly congruous with those of his predecessors on the diplomatic front. His policies on China, Pakistan, and the United States—three enduring bilateral focal points of Indian foreign policy—bear this out.

As far as India's China policy goes, Modi (like Vajpayee before him) has enacted an approach with both competitive and cooperative elements. Modi developed positive working relationships with Chinese counterparts during his tenure as chief minister of Gujarat. By the time he was elected prime minister, a significant fraction of China's investments in India were concentrated in Gujarat.[382] After he took office in New Delhi, Modi continued his outreach to China; indeed, Xi Jinping was the first Chinese president to visit India in eight years, just months after Modi's election.[383] In 2014 and 2015, New Delhi continued to court Beijing, seeking to focus on trade, investment, connectivity, and international cooperation while not letting the border dispute between the two countries get in the way—just as Vajpayee had first suggested when he was foreign minister in the late 1970s.[384] Modi even went against the advice of his own intelligence services when he promised e-visas for Chinese nationals during a visit to Beijing in May 2015.[385]

In 2016 and 2017, the India-China relationship deteriorated significantly—beginning with China's much-publicized 2016 decision to block India from joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group. This downward trend was worsened by a tense months-long military standoff between the two countries in 2017 at Doklam on Bhutanese territory (claimed by China). By mid-2018, the cooperative rhetoric that accompanied a spring 2018 Modi-Xi meeting in the Chinese city of Wuhan began to outweigh strategic competition as the predominant official narrative around India-China relations. While the Nehruvian slogan of "Hindi-Chini bhai bhai" ("India and China are brothers") certainly does not capture Modi's sentiment, he appears to have pragmatically assessed that sustained hostility toward Beijing is not an option for India.[386] That said, this cooperative rhetoric has not yielded any substantive results for India. This became glaringly clear on March 13, 2019, when China—for the fourth time—blocked the United Nations Security Council from designating Pakistan-based JeM founder Masood Azhar as a terrorist.[387] This development came after JeM claimed responsibility for the February 2019 Pulwama attack.[388]

Modi's approach to Pakistan has followed a roughly similar trajectory, blending restraint and resolve. Early in his term, Modi reached out to Islamabad in two striking ways. First, he surprised the international community by inviting then Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in ceremony in the face of opposition from the BJP's traditional right-wing Hindu allies.[389] Second, in December 2015, he became the second prime minister in more than a decade to visit Pakistan (after Vajpayee's 2004 trip). Soon after, however, a spate of serious terrorist attacks on Indian military targets in 2016 markedly worsened the two neighbors' relationship (which is uneasy in the best of times). This downturn culminated in the September 2016 special forces operation India launched inside Pakistan-administered Kashmir as well as the February 2019 airstrikes that Modi ordered on mainland Pakistan.

Despite these terrorist provocations, the Modi government has exercised restraint in its dealings with Pakistan. Modi did not adopt more punishing coercive measures such as abrogating the India-Pakistan Indus Water Treaty in response to the Uri attack, a step advocated by hawks in New Delhi, including Vajpayee's former foreign minister and erstwhile senior BJP leader Yashwant Sinha.[390] While Modi responded to the February 2019 Pulwama attack in dramatic fashion, his government also chose not to escalate tensions any further even though Pakistan downed an Indian Air Force jet during a counterattack on February 27, 2019.

(Pakistan briefly detained the pilot before handing him over to India a few days later.) While India has not resumed official talks with Pakistan since 2016, the countries' national security advisers are reported to be in contact.[391] Finally, and most significantly, the recent Indian decision to develop a land corridor to Pakistan's Kartarpur—a religious destination for Sikhs—indicates Indian flexibility toward Islamabad. (The India-Pakistan agreement on Kartarpur advances discussions initiated by Vajpayee in 1999.[392]) The fact that the Kartarpur talks have continued even after the Pulwama terrorist attack and India's retaliatory airstrikes in Pakistan indicates that, while Modi may not be averse to signaling resolve, he is not interested in completely slamming the door shut on Pakistan.[393]

Modi's outreach to the United States is perhaps the bilateral relationship that most exemplifies Modi's foreign policy flexibility and pragmatism. Soon after his election, Modi visited the country and addressed thousands of members of the North American Indian diaspora at Madison Square Garden in New York.[394] Under Modi's tenure, Barack Obama became the first American president to be the chief guest at the annual parade celebrating India's foundation as a constitutional republic in 2015.[395] In addition, the Modi government signed two key foundational agreements (in August 2016 and September 2018) to strengthen India-U.S. defense cooperation (an earlier such document had been signed by the Vajpayee government in 2002) and instituted the 2+2 foreign and defense ministers/secretaries dialogue mechanism.[396] The signing of these documents represented something of a breakthrough, as many Indian observers feared that they were a pretext for a formal military alliance with the United States. The two countries continue to deepen their commercial defense relationship.

Yet Modi has also been cautious at crucial junctions when it comes to the United States, shrewdly prioritizing Indian national interests over putative U.S. concerns. His government has refused to participate in joint freedom-of-navigation operations with the United States in the South China Sea. Despite U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated exhortations, Modi has also kept India's footprint in Afghanistan light. Beyond that, New Delhi has continued to engage Tehran over its port projects in Chabahar and resisted American calls to stop purchasing petroleum imports from Iran. And most significantly, despite U.S. misgivings, New Delhi has decided to go ahead with the purchase of the S-400 Triumf anti-aircraft missile system from Russia, which remains India's largest source of weaponry.[397] What is striking about both decisions is that the Indian government made them despite signals from Washington that such moves could potentially attract U.S. secondary sanctions and jeopardize U.S.-India relations. These moves, along with Modi's very visible outreach to Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2018, illustrate the Indian prime minister's abiding commitment to "strategic autonomy."[398] In this respect, the overarching theme of Modi's foreign policy has been the same as his predecessors.

Modi's pragmatism also extends to India's growing involvement in multiple formal and informal multilateral groups. It is no surprise that during Modi's tenure India has become a full member of the Russia- and China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while New Delhi also participates in a reborn version of the Quad—an informal bloc of four nations that also includes Australia, Japan, and United States and that seeks to shape security and geoeconomic architectures in the Indo-Pacific. Separately, Modi has promoted the idea of a community of littoral states adjacent to the Bay of Bengal, ostensibly to establish a foothold in Southeast Asia in the face of increasing Chinese influence. Meanwhile, under Modi's watch, India hosted a great many sideline events around the BRICS Summit in 2016.[399] This balancing of multiple networks is the clearest expression of Modi's commitment to a multipolar global order premised on the notion, shared with Vajpayee, that a world with multiple centers of power is a guarantor of strategic space and autonomy for India.[400]

Modi has also sought to use India's rich cultural heritage as a source of pragmatic diplomatic leverage when possible. In 2016, he posited that India's "strategic intent is shaped by our civilizational ethos of "yatharadwad (realism), sah-astitwaa (co-existence) sah-yog (cooperation), tatha (and) sah-bhagita (partnership)."[401] Under Modi, India has increasingly begun to use religious diplomacy, for instance, as a strategic tool for a variety of ends. The innovation of Buddhist diplomacy has become, variously, a tool to keep the Dalai Lama card alive,[402] forge ties with Southeast Asia,[403] and build bridges with China when needed.[404] Similarly, the aforementioned Kartarpur agreement represents a form of religious diplomacy around Sikhism that could help pave the way (at least in a limited sense) for renewed engagement with Pakistan.

Yet Modi's culturally driven outreach has been even broader than that. On the issue of connectivity, the prime minister has sought to develop alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative—an enterprise with serious security implications for India; Modi often has described his alternatives in equally civilizational and evocative terms like new "spice" or "cotton" routes, invoking references to India's past as a trading nation.[405] In all these ways, soft power—that favorite Indian trope—has become infused with a civilizational flavor under Modi. The prime minister has shrewdly acquiesced to the need to portray India in as benign a light as possible, as a contrast to some of China's tone-deaf impulses.[406]

Modi also has promoted multilateral Indian diplomacy around the issue of climate change.[407] In the run-up to the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, he referred to "sunshine countries" (states lying between the Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn) as Suryaputras as a way to help rhetorically promote joint efforts to address the global issue. (In the Sanskrit epic known as the Mahabharata, Suryaputra is another name of Karna, the emblem of virtue.) Yet when all was said and done, the core of India's position at the climate change conference was a hard-nosed form of exceptionalism, asserting in effect that India (and other developing countries) should have different, lower obligations to address climate change—as newly industrializing states—than historically industrial nations do.[408] *Yatharadwad* (realism) seems to be the civilizational ethos Modi—like Vajpayee before him—has internalized the most in shaping India's foreign policy.

"Modi's efforts to strengthen India's capabilities have been middling, marked by the erosion of the latent base of Indian power."

AT HOME IN THE WORLD

During the Cold War, many observers thought that the BJP had little to say about Indian foreign policy.[409] Once the party came to power and operationalized India's nuclear deterrent, scholars began to scrutinize its views more carefully, if only to reach the dire conclusion that it championed "strong, assertive, and militaristic nationalism."[410] More recently still, some observers have questioned whether the BJP even has a distinctive approach to international relations, arguing that its policies simply mirror those of its principal rival, the Congress Party.[411]

Under Vajpayee, an Indian strategic worldview emerged that cultivated hard-power capabilities, embraced the role of force in international politics, aggressively pursued all dimensions of power, and unsentimentally engaged with other states irrespective of past ideological positions. This approach was in sharp contrast with the diplomatic tendencies of the Congress Party. No such explicitly new worldview has emerged under Modi even as he has pursued a pragmatic strategic policy congruous to Vajpayee's approach.

While the prime minister's greatest success has been his vigorous diplomacy with multiple partners, Modi's efforts to strengthen India's capabilities have been middling, marked by the erosion of the latent base of Indian power. Without sufficient material strength, such outreach has often rung hollow. On Modi's watch, India's military might has continued to decline. Instead of expending his once abundant political capital to rectify the situation, Modi has privileged optics over substance. While he has rhetorically acknowledged the importance of force in international politics, he mostly has done so for ideological reasons and with uncertain strategic effect. That said, his use of civilizational tropes to diplomatically further India's national interests is a modest innovation that reflects the BJP's pride in India's ancient heritage.

Whether the BJP's strategic doctrine can be sustained remains to be seen. There has long been a conundrum at the heart of the Hindu nationalist worldview: its proponents understand that weakness invites aggression and that strength, in turn, depends on building capabilities and cultivating alliances. This reality implies a need to single-mindedly expend political capital on economic reforms that would expand the material base of Indian power—something Modi has failed to do. Consolidating India's economic strength also means increasing social cohesion, without which India will be caught fighting enemies within, real or imagined.

The fate of Indian economic reforms depends to a large extent on India's openness to the world, especially in terms of access to capital and technology. But because many Hindu nationalists worry about modernity's social and cultural impact, they are unable to endorse these realities wholeheartedly. As a result, they find themselves, again and again, in the strange position of promising to make India a leading power but actually spending their political capital on initiatives—ranging from the promotion of Vedic science to preventing the consumption of beef—that divide Indians and corrode the very power base that Hindu nationalists imagine will propel India onto the world stage. This is a lesson Modi and his successors must pay heed to in 2019 and beyond.

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