

India, showing states



INDIA'S TWO HEGEMONIES

AMONG THE right-wing strongmen enjoying broad electoral support today, Narendra Modi commands a position in India at least as sweeping as that of Erdoğan in Turkey, or Duterte in the Philippines. Like them, he glories in being a plebeian upstart with a thuggish base, though he rules a country of nearly 1.3 billion people, a sixth of the world's population. Since his victory in 2014, Modi's BJP has enjoyed unchallenged dominance of the national-political scene: an overall majority in both Houses of Parliament, buttressed by control of the largest provincial state legislatures. The latest polls tip him for another five years as prime minister in elections due to be held by Spring 2019.¹ The BJP's nearest rival, the once all-powerful Congress Party, has been reduced to less than a tenth of Lok Sabha seats and governs only a handful of states. Indeed the scale of BJP hegemony today can bear comparison to that of the Indian National Congress party in the first decades after Independence, under Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi. Then, too, a single party with a charismatic figurehead commanded the national scene and predominated at state-provincial level.

What sort of rupture do these new hegemons represent with the more reverential forms of bourgeois rule that went before? The best way to grasp the novelty of India's new regime may be to compare its mode of operation to that of Congress. Electorally, the pattern is clear: an era of single-party Congress rule from Independence in 1947 to the late 1960s, followed by its steady decline and increasing resort to coalition governments; a long interregnum, with the upward trajectory of the BJP and its allies beginning in the late 1980s, after the brief fillip for Congress in 1984, following Indira's assassination; and the restoration of a single-party majority by the BJP under Modi in 2014, thirty years later. Between the two eras lies a major shift in the political-economic epoch, from

the statist developmentalism of the post-war decades to a globalized neoliberalism since the 1990s, reflected in the programmes of both parties; and with it, a dramatic though uneven advance of different caste and class fractions. Here as elsewhere the main political trend, to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall, has been ‘the great moving right show’. The BJP is no ordinary party: its nervous system is supplied by a 1930s-style, uniformed, hard-line Hindu-nationalist cadre force, the RSS, which also controls a wide array of civil-society organizations, known collectively as the Sangh.² Yet this makes its rise as a second all-India hegemon all the more striking. How do the dynamics of the two compare, in terms of national ideologies, party forms, leading figures, class alliances, patterns of rule? This essay will look at the similarities and contrasts between them, and at the passage from the first to the second. For if, in a negative sense, the decline of Congress created the space for the rise of Hindutva forces, in key respects it also paved their way.

I. HEGEMONY OF CONGRESS

To secure a hegemonic bourgeois bloc requires stability at three levels: control over those below, through whatever shifting mix of sticks and carrots; successful arbitration between ruling-class fractions—which in India, still 70 per cent rural, also means effective handling of tensions created by the agrarian bourgeoisie; and a sufficient degree of support from the professional and petty-bourgeois middle classes. As Gramsci pointed out, there is no hegemony without the effort to forge a national-popular will. A successful hegemonic ideology will mask contradictory interests while offering some ‘unified’ sense of belonging to the majority. This is where nationalism comes in, calling for subordination to a ‘higher’ cause or promising benefits to ‘true nationals’, and thereby reconciling otherwise clashing interests. In the Indian context, fighting on the terrain of nationalism has involved securing mass support for one’s

¹ ‘Mega Times Group poll: 71.9 per cent of Indians say they will vote for Narendra Modi as PM again in 2019’, *Times of India*, 26 May 2018. The ABP–CSDS Poll predicts 274 seats for Modi’s National Democratic Alliance coalition, compared to the 2014 tally of 336 for the NDA, of which the BJP secured 282: *Indiatvnews.com*, 11 June 2018.

² RSS: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [National Patriotic Organization], founded 1925. The first electoral party created by the RSS was the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (1951–77), which dissolved itself into the pan-opposition Janata Party in 1977, then reformed as the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party—in English: Indian People’s Party] in 1980.

particular vision of 'India's' cultural and political content. Both the RSS and the Congress emerged as mass-political projects in the inter-war period, and confronted the problem of forging a national-popular will for self-determination against British colonial rule.³ Though their constructions of what Indian nationalism was supposed to mean had differing inflections, they came from a shared starting point.

The idea of 'India'

Nineteenth-century stirrings of Indian national consciousness drew upon a Romantic-Orientalist nationalist historiography crafted by upper-caste Hindus, which glorified an 'ancient'—that is, pre-Muslim—'Hindu' India and denigrated the long centuries of Muslim rule before the arrival of the enlightened British. In the run-up to Independence, both versions of Indian nationalism foregrounded the religious divide. But 'communal' nationalists saw the Mughal era as a foreign-imposed dark age, and the 'unity of Hindus' as the paramount principle on which a strong India must be built. A 'softer' variant, taken up by the Congress leaders, called for a religiously brokered Hindu-Muslim pact, based on 'unity in diversity'. Though Nehru saw virtues in the Mughal rule of Akbar, for most Hindu intellectuals the key factor was the supposedly unique tolerance, goodness and accommodating character of Hinduism, which would enable the development of a composite Indian culture, in turn founding a composite nationalism. Since this accommodating spirit was allegedly ancient, it had to pre-date the coming of Islam and thus once again afforded a special status to a Vedic-inspired Hinduism. This helped to create the myth that, despite the deep entrenchments of caste and wide variations in religious practice, Hinduism constituted a single if mosaic-like faith, the 'mosaic' itself being testimony to its inherent tolerance. This was the basis of the 'secular' Indian nationalism propounded by the Congress leadership, who presented it as founded on a deep, impartial respect for all religious communities—as if imbalances in numerical and power terms would not count.⁴ It was, effectively, 'majoritarian nationalism in a

³ Founded by an Englishman in 1885, as a forum and training ground for an all-India native political elite, the Indian National Congress was transformed by Gandhi and his colleagues after 1919 into a mass political instrument for home rule, later for Independence.

⁴ In 1940, the population of British and Princely State India comprised some 206m caste Hindus, 95m Muslims, 49m Scheduled Castes, 25m Tribals and 5m Sikhs.

liberal garb'.⁵ During the independence struggle, both versions therefore allowed Hinduism's symbols and myths to be deployed for the purposes of popular mobilization; the Gandhi-led Congress made no such use of Muslim symbols.

If Congress predominated with ease over the fractured political landscape of 1930s India—winning nearly half the seats in the limited-franchise 1937 provincial elections, for example—this was in part because its leaders had established themselves as key interlocutors for the British authorities, and took care to damp down any mass mobilizations which threatened that position. By contrast, the Indian Communist Party was banned until 1942, and its militants were executed or imprisoned. The Sangh, for its part, largely stayed away from the independence struggle, preferring to cultivate its 'purity'; the RSS was briefly banned after an ex-member assassinated Gandhi in 1948, but legalized in 1949 by the Home Minister Sardar Patel, more hostile to the Communists than to the 'patriotic if misguided' RSS. As for Congress itself, leadership of the national movement had endowed the party with immense prestige and mass credibility in the first decade after Independence, which also supplied its major ideological adhesive. This was the era in which the Nehruvian Consensus held sway—in reality, a mishmash of developmentalist goals, vague ideals and nationalist themes, such as modernization, 'scientific temper', industrialization, socialism (in the sense of welfarist capitalism), democracy and non-alignment, combined with Indian national unity and the soft-Hindu 'secularism' described above. The latter had little real resonance on the ground; belief in it served more to delude Congress under Nehru that its official nationalism had deep historical roots and thus a strong hegemonic dynamic as well. It did not. Once Independence was achieved, the Congress's ideological porosity became more apparent. If it exercised a sustained hegemony over the next decades, this was due less to its ideology than to more material factors: developmentalism, the first-past-the-post electoral system, the advantages of incumbency and neutralization of any communist threat.

Among these, the developmental promise of Nehruvianism had the greatest public appeal. Between 1950 and 1980 India achieved an annual

⁵ See G. Balachandran, 'Religion and Nationalism in Modern India' in Kaushik Basu and Sanjay Subramanyam, eds, *Unraveling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India's Secular Identity*, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 108–11.

average growth rate of 3.5 per cent, later derisively dismissed as the ‘Hindu rate of growth’, but an economic breakthrough of sorts when compared to the colonial era. In the first two decades of independence, state-led and tariff-protected industrialization nurtured a growing industrial bourgeoisie. Land reform, though limited to the abolition of the *latifundia*-like Zamindari system, created an aspiring—and numerically important—agrarian-capitalist class. The Congress electoral base of Dalits, tribals and mostly poor Muslims saw, or could hope to see, some improvement in their lives. This was accompanied by the institutionalization of local representative bodies, with election to office at various levels, and the subsequent linguistic division of states in 1956, all of which had some degree of public support and helped to stave off mass discontent and buy time. But the uneven outcome of development was also one of the main reasons for the erosion of Congress hegemony. By 1967 it was clear that the Nehruvian promise to bring about a social-democratic version of sustained capitalist progress had failed. The absence of more serious land redistribution ensured that mass immiseration in the countryside would continue. Growing discontent among the new agrarian-capitalist layers, and greater awareness of their mobilizing capacity at provincial level, led to them severing their earlier links with the Congress to set up their own regional parties. Statist developmentalism continued to enjoy widespread hegemony, however, backed by both the Sangh and the CPI.

At the same time, the ‘winner-takes-all’ electoral system established by the Constitution of India, on the Westminster model, continued to give Congress huge parliamentary majorities even as its share of the popular vote began to fall.⁶ Mocking the principle of faithful representation, the first-past-the-post system gives the winning party stronger control over government and its resources, which it can then use to buy further popularity—an artificially enhanced form of hegemony. It has served the BJP equally well: in 2014, the party won 51 per cent of seats with 31 per cent of the vote. Despite its reputation as an outstanding, liberal and democratic text, the Constitution also set family law—marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance, family property—under the control of the various religious authorities, instead of instituting a uniform civil code. This was due in part to Congress’s wooing of the Muslim Ulama

⁶ In 1957, Congress won 75 per cent of Lok Sabha seats with 48 per cent of the vote; in 1962, 73 per cent of seats with 45 per cent of votes; in 1967, 54 per cent of seats with 41 per cent of votes; in 1971, 67 per cent of seats with 43 per cent of votes.

for its vote block, but also to the ‘soft’ Hindu nationalism of so many of the Congress representatives at the 1946–50 Constituent Assembly. (Ironically, this has allowed the Sangh to position itself as more progressive than Congress, as an ardent proponent of a civil code, while castigating the other parties and secular intellectuals for seeking to ‘appease’ the ‘backward’ Muslims.)

Insofar as the construction of hegemony requires the friction of a ‘dangerous other’, did the Communists Party of India serve this purpose? Certainly, during the Nehruvian era, the then-undivided CPI was the main domestic challenger, the runner-up in the first three general elections.⁷ Its prestige among working masses was high; it led major industrial struggles in Bombay and powerful peasant movements in West Bengal, Bihar and Telangana, where it had sparked a major uprising in 1946 against the Nizam of Hyderabad and his landlord supporters before Nehru sent the Indian Army to seize the province, eventually accomplished at the price of a terrible pogrom.⁸ In 1957 the CPI became the first opposition party to win control of a state assembly, Kerala, where it instituted land, labour and education reforms. Nehru responded by dismissing the CPI state government in 1959, a clear abuse of his legislative power. However, Moscow also put pressure on the CPI to lessen its opposition to the Congress, in support of the USSR’s narrow diplomatic interests—one reason why Nehru assiduously cultivated the Soviet Union’s friendship. The USSR supported Nehru’s non-aligned foreign policy and also helped India set up major public-sector heavy industries. By 1962, the CPI leadership had swung round to supporting Nehru in his aggressive handling of the border conflict with China, which led to the Sino-Indian war. But this caused a major split in the Party in 1964, with the breakaway Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI-M, distancing

⁷ In 1952, the CPI was second in the Lok Sabha with 16 seats; in 1957 it got 27 seats; in 1962, 29 seats.

⁸ In 1946 the CPI mobilized a peoples’ army and militia covering some 3,000 villages, with a population of around 3 million and took over a million acres for distribution to the landless. When New Delhi moved in, the CPI was divided on whether to continue the armed uprising or curtail it, since it shared the view that Hyderabad should be part of the Indian Union. When a section of the CPI continued the peasant struggle, the Congress government turned against and helped crush it, restoring the land to its old owners, while the Nizam himself was given the ceremonial status of a Chief Protector (*Raj Pramukh*) of the new Hyderabad state. The CPI called off the struggle in 1951 but did well in the subsequent elections.

itself as a sharp critic of Congress from the left, while cultivating friendlier relations with China. The smaller CPI remained so close to Congress that it actually supported Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule.

Leadership and intelligentsia

Congress hegemony in the fifties and sixties could also rely on the support of the intelligentsia and the media. Radio was in government hands, but even the privately owned print media were overwhelming supportive of the Nehruvian project of nation-making in this period. Nehru's persona as an educated patrician undoubtedly played a role in this: from an enormously wealthy Hindu family, schooled at Harrow, with a Cambridge degree in natural sciences, legal training at the Inner Temple and political education through the Fabian Society, he was a best-selling author of poetic volumes on Indian culture and history. But his international travels counted too. For a domestic audience, India's global status as a nation was identified with Nehru's personal credibility as a world statesman, as the main proponent of non-alignment and its most articulate propagandist. All this greatly burnished his appeal among the fledgling Indian intelligentsia, ensuring its loyalty—and, of course, guaranteeing his primacy within the party at home.⁹ Nehru's extensive use of Parliament as a national platform, which he took very seriously, helped to create an aura of respect for the legislative process and parliamentary debate, the basis for a broader democratic ethos.

Arguably, the very incoherence of Congress ideology meant greater reliance on Nehru's role as a charismatic leader. Unlike the BJP and earlier political instruments of the Sangh, Congress was never a cadre-based party: Ambedkar memorably described it as a party 'open to all fools and knaves, friends and foes, communalists and secularists, reformers and orthodox, and capitalists and anti-capitalists.'¹⁰ Organizationally, Congress was run from the apex by Sardar Patel, the party strongman,

⁹ It is possible that the strongly religious character of Indian society also creates the ground for highly personalized populisms to take root. This would seem evident from the popularity at times that others after Nehru down to Modi have enjoyed. But the longest lasting of hegemonies must transcend such reliance on one charismatic leader. Even if Nehru had lived longer—he died in 1964, aged 74—it is doubtful that his personal appeal could have stemmed the slide in Congress popularity, given the party's ideological and organizational limitations.

¹⁰ Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi*, London 2007, p. 137.

who selected and financed candidates, raised funds and cracked down on dissent. Patel represented the dominant current within the Congress leadership: upper caste and upper class, ideologically pro-Hindu (though in a softer variant than Hindutva) and economically elitist. It was Patel's early death in 1950 that gave Nehru a freer rein within the party, not necessarily because its middle and upper echelons shared the Fabian aspects of his 'idea of India'. Beyond this, what held Congress together as a powerful political force, despite rising factionalism, were its links to rural elites, the financial support of big and aspiring industrialists, and an organizational structure that could act as a network of patronage and clientelism, providing the loaves and fishes of office to leaders at various levels who, in turn, would rev up the machinery of voter mobilization at election time. It was also the only body that could carry out the hegemon's tasks of class conciliation and arbitration, hammering out policy compromises that lower castes and classes would accept. But the price paid by dependence, first upon Nehru, then his descendants, to provide a face for this machine would be a high one, as dynastic rot set in: Indira (authoritarian), Sanjay (vicious), Rajiv (corrupt), Sonia (secretive), Rahul (vacillating). The Nehru-Gandhi family's right to rule would become a deadweight on the party.

A Hinduized state apparatus

As in Gramsci's classic formula, consent was backed with coercion in the operation of Congress hegemony. This was apparent both in the role of armed force in the construction of a 'strong', unitary Indian nation-state, at the moment of Independence, and in the bloody suppression of minority, ethnic, religious and class rebellions that followed. The Partition agreement stitched up between V. P. Menon, Mountbatten, Nehru, Patel and Jinnah was pushed through at point-blank notice without popular consultation: provinces were issued with an ultimatum and their legislative assemblies told to choose between joining Congress-ruled India, Muslim League-led Pakistan or—as with Bengal and Punjab—splitting themselves between the two. At least a million were killed in the resulting panic, above all in the Punjab, and 12–18 million fled their homes. In Muslim-majority Kashmir, an obsession of Nehru's, Indian forces were air-lifted to Srinagar and took possession of most of the province, the Nehru government denying the promised plebiscite to ascertain the popular will. Nehru and Patel also suppressed a report of the 1948 massacres in Hyderabad, where between

27,000 and 40,000 Muslims were killed when Indian troops sent in to secure the principality joined local Hindu police and armed gangs in a pogrom.¹¹ In Bengal, Congress—and G. D. Birla, Gandhi's millionaire patron—backed the Sangh/Hindu Mahasabha campaign for Partition against a joint Hindu–Muslim movement for a united, independent state. If these moves were largely rational, given the Congress goal of a 'strong India' characterized by Hindu predominance, Nehruvian foreign policy was more erratic. The solidaristic goals of non-alignment were abandoned when New Delhi provoked the border war with China in 1962, resulting in a humiliating defeat. Congress's nationalist and militarist *amour propre* was restored by war with Pakistan in 1965, when India escalated hostilities in response to Pakistani infiltration across the Kashmir ceasefire line.

Before Partition, Muslims made up 32 per cent of the Indian Army. After it, though the Republic of India inherited the vast bulk of the Raj's military personnel and hardware, Muslims fell to around 2 per cent. The Congress in all its years of rule did nothing to alter this demographic. The Indian military has always viewed Pakistan as its main enemy; its Hindu composition has helped to promote a conflation of anti-Pakistani with anti-Muslim sentiment, running in both directions. The then-Socialist George Fernandes, later a defence minister in the BJP coalition, summed up the position in 1985: 'The Muslim is not wanted in the Armed Forces because he is always suspect'—'whether we want to admit it or not, most Indians consider Muslims a fifth column for Pakistan.'¹² It is reasonable to assume that a significant proportion of officers and soldiers have long been sympathetic to Hindutva. In the late eighties and early nineties, during the 'Rama's Birthplace' campaign—the Ram Janmabhoomi, in which right-wing Hindu groups fought to build a temple on the site of the old Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, claiming the mosque was located where the god had been born—Indian Army chiefs made clear they would not take responsibility for protecting the mosque because Army *jawans* were overwhelmingly Hindus whose battle cries were invocations of Lord Ram. (The Indian

¹¹ The 1949 Sunderlal Committee Report was only released in 2013 after a petition by a Cambridge student, Sunil Purushotham. See Abhirup Dam, '27,000 Massacred, Bloody Price of 'Liberation': Hyderabad 1948', 17 Sept 2015: www.thequint.com.

¹² Pranay Gupte, *Vengeance! India After the Assassination of Indira Gandhi*, New York, 1985; pp. 195–6. Mrs Gandhi's assassins were Sikhs.

Army exhibited no such qualms when it came to military assaults on the Sikhs' Golden Temple in 1984 or the Muslim shrine of Charar-e-Sharif in Kashmir in 1995.¹³)

A similar mindset prevailed in other agencies of the coercive state. The central intelligence agencies set up by Congress—the Intelligence Bureau (IB) in 1947, the Central Board of Investigation (CBI) in 1963, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) in 1968—have never had an independent legal framework or Charter of Duties to safeguard against political manipulation; the IB has carried out election analyses and forecasts for the governing party. Another body, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) was set up in 2008, under a Congress-led government, to deal with 'terrorism'; to date its targets have included journalists and stone-throwing teenagers in Kashmir, as well as Naxalite militants.

The Hindu communalization of the police has been particularly frightening. Constitutionally the state governments have had responsibility for maintaining law and order, unless they called for help from the Centre. But state police were poorly trained, ill-disciplined and under-equipped compared to the Indian Police Service (IPS), which answered to the central government. Technically the IPS was supposed to make law-enforcement decisions independently of governing parties during demonstrations, strikes, elections, riots—but governments wielded the power of postings and transfers over recalcitrant officers.¹⁴ Communal attitudes have been pervasive. Several official inquiries, including by the National Police Commission, have shown police partiality in acting as a 'Hindu force', with perceptible discrimination against Muslims in the use of violence, preventive arrests, curfew decisions and treatment of detainees.¹⁵ In communal riots, Hindus see the police as friends and protectors; not so Muslims. All too often, police actively collaborate with the rioters.¹⁶ As a result Muslims, the principal sufferers in

¹³ See Omar Khalidi, *Khaki and Ethnic Violence in India*, New Delhi, 2003 pp. 34–5.

¹⁴ According to a former Deputy Inspector General of Police, 'No riot can continue beyond 24 hours unless the state wants it to': K. S. Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*, New Delhi 2007, p. 80.

¹⁵ The commissions of inquiry themselves, mostly set up under Congress rule, can become a substitute for the absence of direct investigation, detection and punishment of uniformed culprits: Upendra Baxi, *Inhuman Wrongs and Human Rights: Unconventional Essays*, New Delhi 1994.

¹⁶ Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India*, pp. 49–50.

riots, actually ask for Army intervention, not trusting the partisan police and paramilitaries.

2. HEGEMONY OF THE BJP

What are the similarities and contrasts between this Nehruvian mode of rule and that of today's BJP? Some continuities have already been noted. As with Congress at its height, Modi's parliamentary dominance is based on first-past-the-post pluralities in the densely populated 'cow belt' states of the Hindi heartland, where—unlike in the South, which had strong anti-Brahmin movements—Brahminized and upper-caste values, attitudes and practices have held wider and deeper cultural-ideological sway.¹⁷ This concentration of support in the populous, seat-rich states of the North and West explains why the BJP could secure a single-party majority with only 31 per cent of the overall vote: the BJP won 131 of the 149 seats in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar.¹⁸ At the same time, it's reasonable to believe that both former Congress voters and supporters of regional parties switched to the BJP, suggesting that Hindutva has become an attractive worldview especially among youth and an aspirational category of voters categorized as 'not rich, not middle class, not below the poverty line'.¹⁹ To take solace from the BJP's relatively low percentage of the vote will not do, especially since it has dramatically expanded since 2014, securing single-party rule in sixteen of twenty-nine states, with four others ruled through coalition partners. (Congress at its peak controlled eighteen states.)

Ideologically, the Sangh's call to 'make India strong' represents a coarser, more belligerent and exclusivist nationalism than the Congress brand.

¹⁷ The cow-belt region was also the cradle of the RSS, which had a well-entrenched network of branches, cadres and affiliates there as early as 1947.

¹⁸ By comparison, Congress in 1989 won 197 seats with 40 per cent of the vote, and in 1991 won 244 seats with 36 per cent of the vote—its nationally dispersed electorate could not compensate for its much weaker performance in the big states.

¹⁹ See Ravinder Kaur, 'The "Emerging" Middle Class', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 June 2014. Kaur describes these layers as aspirants to the middle class, respectful of religious leaders, consumers of well-packaged religiosity and religious-philosophical wisdoms, appreciative of Modi's strongman appeal and irritated by 'secular' talk, which is seen as ignoring their concerns while appeasing Muslims. The voter turnout of youth was higher than the overall rate, and the BJP won the largest single share among 18–22 year olds.

The contrast with what China had achieved domestically, as well its rising global status, could only fuel the sense of relative inferiority. In the eyes of the BJP's new layer of elite supporters, Congress had failed to build a nation that—by virtue of its size, population, resources and a past history of civilizational attainment beyond anything that the West had achieved—deserved nothing less. The Indian nation must no longer be weakened by 'culprits' from within or without. As a hegemonic ideology, the BJP/Sangh's harder form of Hindu nationalism is better equipped to call for subordination to a 'higher cause' and thereby achieve a working reconciliation of competing interests.

Party and leader

The most obvious contrasts with Congress lie in the organizational character of the BJP and the figure of its national leader. One striking difference with almost all the other parties, including the Congress and the Left, is that the BJP has never suffered a major split—testament to its ideological discipline and cohesion. The party operates a streamlined hierarchy, where each level takes decisions about the level below and obeys the one above it. The state apex is headed by Amit Shah and his coterie; below them come district chiefs, then block heads and so on, down to units which comprise 12 booth committees. These committees provide information on local caste composition, to help target appropriate messaging and election-day mobilization. The BJP also poaches many 'likely-to-win' candidates from local parties that are not opposed in principle to Sangh ideology, tempting them through lure of money, re-election promises and the fact of having such a powerful voter-mobilizing capacity.²⁰ But the BJP's biggest asset remains its massive cadre base, which includes foot soldiers willing to wreak violence on command. The rise of the far right is a worldwide phenomenon, but nowhere else is there a force like the Sangh, which has had an unbroken existence of over ninety years and a width and depth of implantation in civil society unmatched in any other country. The BJP and the Sangh, the broader family to which it belongs, represent a far-right force with undeniable neo-fascist characteristics. Apart from the BJP and RSS, the VHP (World Hindu Council) is the other main pan-Indian body. It is the 'overlord' for cultural-religious activities, with mutually beneficial links

²⁰ For the most comprehensive such account see Prashant Jha, *How the BJP Wins: Inside India's Greatest Election Machine*, New Delhi 2017.

to the leaders of numerous Hindu sects. VHP muscle and money help these sects to grow, thereby enhancing the aura of their leaders, who duly call on their devotees to support Sangh campaigns, programmes and electoral candidates.²¹

The RSS has around three dozen affiliates, ranging from associations of ex-servicemen, scientists, accountants, etc., to one of the largest trade-union federations, a peasant organization, a women's organization and the biggest student wing. It has the country's largest network of private schools, the Vidya Bharati and close to eight hundred NGOs working in areas of disaster relief, health and development.²² The RSS now has over 58,000 local branches (*shakas*) which hold daily, weekly and monthly meetings for their members, differentiated by age, profession and motivational levels.²³ All this is held together by seasoned RSS and VHP cadres, full- and part-time, who are regularly accountable to their superiors. Decades of such routinized welfare and mobilizing activities explain why Hindutva has expanded outside the Hindi heartland into parts of the northeast, the south and one-time left strongholds like Tripura, West Bengal and Kerala. Being in power at the Centre and in so many states means the Sangh now attracts many more supporters by straightforward patronage politics, while retaining an expanded core of the ideological faithful.

While caste remains important in shaping voter preferences, the personalization of politics is also a fact. Opinion polls consistently show Modi to be significantly more popular than the BJP or RSS, let alone other party leaders. As their political front-man, Modi could hardly be a starker contrast to the Congress dynasts. Born in 1950, he comes from a modest background in small-town Gujarat—his father ran a tea stall at the local railway station—and a community classed among the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). He began attending RSS sessions while still a child. At eighteen he quit his family home and his new bride, Jashodaben—the marriage had been contracted when they were both children—apparently

²¹ The result is the further 'syndicalization' of Hinduism. See Thomas Blom Hansen, 'The Vernacularisation of Hindutva', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1996.

²² Badri Narayan, "The Makeover of the RSS", *The Hindu*, 22 December 2016. The RSS affiliate Bajrang Dal ['protection squad'] comprises lumpen/unemployed youth who attack marked-out targets, absolving other Sangh affiliates from responsibility for violence.

²³ Vikas Pathak, 'RSS reports sharp rise in shakas in 2018', *The Hindu*, 10 March 2018.

aiming to enter an ashram, but was rejected for his lack of higher education. Settling in Ahmedabad, Modi worked his way up through the ranks of the Gujarati RSS as a full-time militant, going underground during the Emergency. In 1985 he was assigned to electoral organizing for the BJP, becoming national secretary of the party in 1995 and helping to secure its electoral victory of 1999. Rather than serve in the national government under Vajpayee and Advani, however, Modi edged out the incumbent BJP Chief Minister in Gujarat to take the job himself.

Modi's personal ruthlessness was apparent in the way he treated his abandoned wife, who was denied a passport by his government. Ironically, this very absence of close family ties has given him the public aura of a dedicated patriot with no reason to be personally corrupt.²⁴ Modi has always followed a health and yoga regimen that gives him remarkable physical energy to devote to politics throughout the day and much of the night. He is a skilled public orator in Hindi and Gujarati, but dislikes critical or sophisticated interlocutors and avoids Parliament, where he has never subjected himself to open question-and-answer sessions. By comparison to Nehru or Indira Gandhi, Modi has a rigid and inflexible mind for which the prescriptions of Hindutva *are* the truth. The media are kept at arms' length: favoured journalists are allowed the rare newspaper or TV interview. Modi is the only Indian prime minister who, in four years, has never held a public press conference. Yet never before has any Indian leader plastered billboards, bus-stands, newspapers—everywhere—with his own image, topping government proclamations of all kinds, even stooping to take pictorial credit for the smallest government schemes initiated by this or that ministry, including programmes set up under the previous administrations. Either Modi's self-obsession knows no bounds, or he thinks that a Goebbelsian construction of personalized populism is the recipe for political longevity. Nor has any prime minister been quite so peripatetic. As of August 2018, he had visited 57 countries in six continents. This apparently has less to do with compelling geopolitical and economic considerations than with the drive of an insecure personality to project himself as a world leader.

The Prime Minister's Office today is highly secretive and power is tightly centralized, even if Modi doesn't quite enjoy the solitary pre-eminence of

²⁴ It is an unwritten rule in India that neither the mainstream media nor the leaders of opposition parties will delve into or make public the personal sex lives and foibles of their opponents. That dimension will have to await a future biographer of Modi.

Nehru. On domestic affairs, the two who count are Modi and Amit Shah, current BJP president and the second most powerful person in the country.²⁵ On foreign policy Modi relies on Ajit Doval, a former Intelligence Bureau chief with a record of skullduggery in the North-East, Myanmar and Kashmir. The one sophisticated face at the top level of government is Arun Jaitley, who holds the finance portfolio and has a wide network of contacts in the media world and corporate sector; a former Supreme Court lawyer and Vajpayee's Minister of Law and Justice, Jaitley also exercises great influence on the judiciary and wider legal fraternity. But Jaitley has no political base of his own and is therefore controllable. The bond between Shah and Modi is based on their division of responsibilities and the fact that each knows too much about the other to risk undermining him. This personalization of power by Modi is not something that the RSS approves of—the organization is all. But recognizing that state power is crucial for its Hindutva project, which has allowed the BJP to gain more ground in the relationship between the two, the RSS has had to stay quiet. Should Modi's personal popularity falter, however—economic problems, electoral losses—the knives will be out.

Media and intelligentsia

The Modi government doesn't enjoy the same monopoly of media support as the Congress at its height. Nevertheless, it has benefited from the dramatic expansion in vernacular newspapers and non-English TV channels since the mid-eighties. In the north, centre and west of India, the dominant print and electronic media are in Hindi and, by virtue of their upper-caste ownership, broadly aligned to 'Hindu politics'. English-language papers and TV channels traditionally tilted more to Congress and, as the 'Brahmins' of the media world, had an influence far greater than their circulation and viewing figures would otherwise warrant. This has changed, thanks to two key shifts in power relations. Journalists are now mostly on short-term contracts, as elsewhere, and are more beholden to the political whims and monetary preoccupations of proprietors and management, who have in turn subordinated

²⁵ Fourteen years younger than Modi, the heavy-jowled Gujarati was a youthful recruit to the RSS in Ahmedabad and has been by his side since the 1980s, holding twelve portfolios in the Gujarat state government when Modi was chief minister there. Trailed by allegations of dirty dealing, including murder, Shah has been a key electoral strategist for Modi and claims to have driven up BJP membership to over a million, exceeding that of the Chinese Communist Party.

themselves more fully to political authority. Advertising from government-controlled units at the state and Central levels constitutes an important source of revenues for them. The BJP government is less bothered than the Congress about presenting a liberal face, and seems even more determined to micro-monitor and quietly warn papers and channels about allowing ‘excessive’ criticism, retracting financial support from those who disobey. Both the Press Council of India, which is supposed to play an independent watchdog role, and the body responsible for the accreditation of journalists, are now saturated with BJP appointees. The ‘Murdochization’ of much of the print and electronic media is a fact.²⁶ In the US, where historically the growth of corporations was more independent of Central power and largesse, the corporate-controlled media have been much more critical of Trump than their Indian counterparts have dared to be of Modi.

The RSS/BJP caught on to social media much earlier than the Congress—the BJP set up a website in 1995, the Congress in 2003. Modi had Facebook and Twitter accounts in 2009, and now has personalized accounts as prime minister, with over 50 million Twitter followers, the highest of any world political leader; Congress President Rahul has 6 million.²⁷ The RSS helped the BJP to set up a huge social-media cell with its own IT branches for organized trolling. According to a disillusioned former insider this is superbly organized, with paid techies given hit-lists of people to attack and going into overdrive during elections. Apparently there are no legal financial limits on party-political propaganda on social media.²⁸ It is something of an irony that, compared to print, TV and radio—where Modi has his own monthly talk show on the

²⁶ India’s richest man and owner of the biggest corporation, Reliance Industries Limited, Mukesh Ambani, is also the top media mogul after acquiring Network 18 TV group, part of the Eenadu group of newspapers in the South and starting the 4G mobile network, Jio. For a detailed survey see, Paranjy Guha Thakurta, ‘Future of Alternative Media’, in Ashish Kothari and K. J. Joy, eds, *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled*, Authors Upfront, New Delhi 2017. Guha Thakurta is a former Editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly*.

²⁷ Times News Network, ‘Amit Shah most followed Indian politician after PM on Twitter’, *Times of India*, 7 March 2018. By September 2016 over 367 million Indians had internet connectivity. See Aarati Krishnan, ‘How many Indians have Internet?’ *The Hindu*, 26 March 2017.

²⁸ Swati Chaturvedi, *I am a Troll: Inside the secret world of the BJP’s digital army*, New Delhi 2016.

state broadcasting channels—counter-propaganda against the BJP can be done very cheaply on social media.

Interestingly, over the past fifteen years the BJP/Sangh has acquired what the Congress always possessed, namely a substantial layer of articulate, English-speaking commentators, policy experts and ideologues. How and why did this come about? It built on part on the existing Hindu ‘common sense’ about the Hindu–Muslim relationship, in conditions where a ‘fuzzy’ identity boundary, which had persisted through centuries of co-existence—basically a functional one, of work and exchange—had been sharpened by Partition. Given the appropriate circumstances, past and present prejudices could more easily translate into the belligerent nationalism of the Hindu *rashtra*, or nation—which would have been far more difficult to believe in, let alone try and bring about, had the country not been partitioned, with half its Muslim population hived off to Pakistan. The key fact is that this layer of the intelligentsia has accepted the Sangh version of what is required to ‘make India strong’. At the same time, a number of prominent liberal intellectuals who cautiously welcomed Modi’s ascent in 2014, believing that the demands of government would moderate BJP behaviour, have now become opponents, dismayed by Modi’s disregard for their ‘vision of India’. A more general climate of fear, plus higher levels of public abuse and legal harassment of dissenters and liberal NGOs, has promoted greater self-censorship and political conformism, however reluctant.

Hegemonizing public culture and education has always been the Sangh goal. In the coalition governments of 1977–80 and 1998–2004, its leaders fought hard for control over the Information and Broadcasting (I&B) and Human Resource Development (HRD) ministries. Now ruling on its own, the BJP has moved further and faster in appointing its people at the head of national and state universities, research centres, technical institutes, school textbook committees, cultural academies, archives, censorship boards and so forth. Congress, of course, looked to block the appointment of independent-minded Marxists to these bodies in the fifties and sixties, but that process usually operated behind the scenes, relying on a widely shared establishment outlook, without requiring active political intervention. Today, overt manipulation—or flagrant disregard of existing rules—to plant ideologically loyal teaching staff in national universities has reached new heights. Jawaharlal Nehru

University (JNU)—whose Social Science and Humanities faculties had become the main training ground for home-grown liberal and leftist intellectuals—has suffered serious setbacks from a Centrally approved onslaught on its standards of recruitment, research and teaching, despite the courageous resistance of many teachers and students. The BJP also aims to replace (even as it suborns) the Universities Grants Commission, charged with national oversight of over 800 universities and 40,000 colleges. A new Higher Education Commission, controlled by Central Government, will focus on establishing ‘uniform’ academic standards—codeword for the Hindutva agenda. Failure to meet them will incur penalties, while new courses will require prior authorization. Meanwhile funding cuts will push public institutions towards privatization.²⁹ By comparison, Congress manipulation in higher education was more haphazard and delimited.

Continuing coercion

Both Congress and the BJP have sought to crush the Maoist insurgency—Manmohan Singh, the last Congress prime minister, called it, not Hindutva, the gravest threat to internal security. Similarly, in Kashmir and the North-East, the BJP has continued the programme of repression it inherited from Congress, aimed at maintaining political control and territorial unity no matter the human cost. To this the BJP has added an extra ideological overlay of hatred for Muslims and ramped up the Congress boasts of ‘teaching Pakistan a lesson’. Hence the Modi government’s deliberate publicizing of the routine incursions and cross-border shooting in which both sides have long engaged. This is a deliberate gambit to rouse public anger domestically and to present the forces of Hindutva as the most determined protectors of national pride and honour. Naturally it is the Muslim inhabitants of the Kashmir Valley that suffer the most, with the youth particular targets of the Indian security forces. Congress under Nehru had already brought in quasi-colonial laws granting immunity to armed personnel in these regions, no matter how viciously or high-handedly they behaved towards the people there. But in the last few years the Indian Army in Kashmir has stepped up the indiscriminate, mass-scale use of pellet guns, firing into the faces of protesters and bystanders alike, with thousands partially or wholly blinded and otherwise disfigured. The military has also been

²⁹ See the *Frontline* special issue, ‘Higher Education in Peril’, August 2018.

firing live bullets against protesting citizens and stone-throwers, the latter routinely designated as allies of ‘terrorists’ and therefore justifiably targeted in a ruthless and inhuman manner. The Army top brass has been emboldened in voicing its political biases. The current Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Rawat, has thundered that a predominantly Muslim body in Assam, the All-India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), has been growing faster than the BJP by virtue of ‘planned immigration’ from Bangladesh. Gen. V. K. Singh, current Minister of Defence and a former Army Chief of Staff, joined the BJP a few years after retiring from the Army, and donned the full uniform of the RSS when invited to one of its functions.³⁰

Communal riots have been a recurrent feature in India under state governments of all colours, barring those of the Left. The overwhelming bulk of victims has been Muslim. So far none has surpassed in scale the 1948 massacres in Hyderabad. The 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, however, set two new precedents. For the first time, there were widespread attacks on Muslims in the villages, and large numbers of Dalits, Tribals and women took part. This pattern has been subsequently repeated. These are not random outbreaks of violence but assaults that are politically determined by the Sangh in their timing and purpose. Psychologically speaking, the involvement of otherwise subordinate and marginal sections of the population like women, Dalits and Tribals has proved to be a debased form of ‘empowerment’, serving to highlight Hindu–Muslim identities while masking caste and gender differences through the collective practice of violence. Episodic riots on this scale require a trigger and some degree of prior preparation. In the last four years they have been complemented by routinized, micro-level attacks on individual Muslims by groups of ‘outraged Hindus’ in the name of cow protection, or suspicion of being illegal migrants, or other concocted reasons, including simply being a Muslim.³¹ Perpetrators mostly get away without being

³⁰ See ‘Assam Up in Arms as Army Chief Wades into Political Territory’, *The Wire*, 28 February 2018; ‘Olive green former Army Chief Gen. V. K. Singh dons RSS Uniform’, *National Herald*, 2 March 2018. During the first BJP-led government under Vajpayee, ex-servicemen, including retired generals, were systematically recruited into party politics. This had never happened on such a scale before. In private settings the officer corps now gives free voice to anti-Muslim prejudices.

³¹ According to the website *Indiaspend* there were 63 incidents of cow-related violence leading to 28 deaths between 2010 and 2017. The years 2014–17 account for 97 per cent of these incidents and 86 per cent of those killed are Muslims.

charged, while senior leaders involved in large-scale riots have now been reprieved.³² The result is a wider sense of insecurity among Muslims because of the banalization of everyday violence. The propaganda success lies not so much in Hindus hating Muslims—a majority are probably indifferent to their plight—but in labelling talk of the Muslim condition today as ‘minority appeasement’ that diverts attention from the problems of the Hindu majority.

Institutions

If the ‘commonsense’ worldview of the Indian Armed Forces and Police has long been a hard variant of Hindu nationalism, what of the other national institutions? The Indian Civil Service was trained from the start to obey its political masters. Ideologically, for the Sangh, the more committed senior bureaucrats are to Hindutva the better: there is now an official proposal to allow lateral entry to top administrative positions by government-selected outsiders. That the top three constitutional posts—prime minister, president, vice-president, with all their associated powers—are now all headed by former cadre of the RSS certainly helps. Beyond this, the Modi government has its eye on the two bodies that have hitherto been the most independent from the executive: the Election Commission—officials who travel round the country at election times, organizing and overseeing the voting processes, state by state—and the judiciary. For the first, the BJP plans to introduce electoral ‘bonds’ which big donors can purchase for political funding. The names and sums involved would be kept secret, known only to the state-owned banks that created the bonds—and therefore to the government—and so a huge boost for money power in elections.

India’s reputation as the ‘world’s largest democracy’ is highly disputable: its macro-electoral structures have endured but are substantially hollowed

³² To take some examples: a former DIG of Police in Gujarat, D.G. Vanzara charged in 2007 for conducting fake ‘encounter killings’—when police shoot on sight, allegedly in self-defence—was released on bail in 2015, with charges dismissed in 2017. Charges against Amit Shah for involvement in the same killing were dropped when the BJP won the 2014 election. Charges against the Sangh’s female preacher, Sadhvi Pragya Thakur, related to a 2006 bomb-blast in the Muslim-majority town of Malegaon were dropped by the NIA in 2016, while her alleged co-conspirator, Lt Col. S. K. Purohit was bailed out in 2017. In April 2018 the NIA acquitted all five accused of a 2007 bombing at a famous mosque in Hyderabad, which killed 9 and injured 58 Muslims during Friday prayers. Rohini Sailan, a special prosecutor in this case (since retired) publicly stated that she had been pressured to ‘go slow’ on the accused.

out and, in any case, produce gross first-past-the-post distortions of the popular will; at the meso- and micro-level there is so much violence that the label 'democratic rights' hardly seems deserved. However, despite instances of booth capturing and manipulation of electronic-voting machines since their recent introduction, one crucial aspect of democratic functioning is that there really has been no reason to dispute final outcomes in general and state elections, even if victory margins may be questionable. Both BJP and Congress, with all the resources of incumbency, and confident of returning to power, have suffered unanticipated defeats at election times. This is a tribute to the Election Commission. How long it will last in its present form remains to be seen.

Clearly, the BJP has no intention of dispensing with the electoral system. That the party is investing so much effort in building up its formidable vote-mobilizing machinery, that Modi spends so much more time than any previous prime minister on the campaign trail, and so much energy goes into data mining to back up direct messaging through social media and face-to-face canvassing, should be evidence of that. The BJP wants the legitimacy provided by winning power through elections, and it is unlikely that Modi will impose a period of 'emergency rule' to match Indira's. The aim is not to eradicate this key dimension of a liberal-democratic set-up but to continue to exploit the legitimating ideal of 'majority rule' as the basis for building a Hindu *rashtra* in which 'Hindu interests' are prioritized. In this view minorities, Muslims in particular, must either accept the fact that they live in a 'Hindu India'—all the stronger as a nation, culturally and politically, for being so—or face the consequences.

Over the past fifty years India's Supreme Court has all too often prostrated itself before government dictates and pressures. By contrast to the American system, which gives state-level high courts much greater independence in resisting Supreme Court rulings—currently allowing a significant degree of legal fightback against Trump's directives—India's Supreme Court is one of the most powerful in the world and simply overrules state courts, for better and worse. As a result, the Executive doesn't have to worry much about lower courts; the apex of the system is the key target. Utterly supine during Congress Emergency rule in the seventies, the Supreme Court stiffened its spine somewhat in the eighties, but from the nineties has largely conformed to the perspectives of the regime in power at the Centre, especially with respect to communal issues such as the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid. After its destruction, the restoration of the area to the mosque's rightful owners, the Sunni Wakf

Board, was first delayed and then abrogated when an Allahabad High Court ruled that it should be partitioned between three claimants, two of them Hindu. That ruling has now come before the Supreme Court for final adjudication; a former Chief Justice, J. S. Khehar, has actually suggested that he mediate an out-of-court settlement between victim and victimizers.

The Supreme Court has proved tougher in defending its own privileges. So far it has fought off attempts by both Congress and BJP governments to give the Executive veto power over the appointment of top-ranking judges, whose selection is reserved to the Collegium of the Supreme Court. In 2017, the Modi government negotiated the right to veto an appointment on grounds of ‘national security’, on the basis of a written objection. It has succeeded in getting the Supreme Court and all High Courts to compile databases on judges and now supposedly ‘assists’ in making appointments, although this has been stalled for over a year because the Centre has still not okayed the Memorandum of Procedure detailing the administrative process for appointments. Meanwhile the current Chief Justice, Dipak Misra, has been accused of acquiring land under a false affidavit when he was a lawyer and of failing to recuse himself in a Supreme Court case in which he’d earlier been involved—instead ruling in favour of two High Court judges under investigation for possible bribery.³³ In January 2018, the next four top-ranking judges had held a press conference criticizing Mishra for failing to address their grievances, particularly regarding his allocation of sensitive cases to lower-ranking judges, in disregard of seniority or expertise, and in violation of past norms and procedures. The implication was that Mishra was accommodating Shah and Modi’s desires; his record as judge and lawyer would certainly make him vulnerable to such pressures. This Supreme Court, then, is the frail safeguard of rights—and the source for any legal resistance to Hindutva. Against the Modi government, it has for the first time explicitly read privacy as a fundamental right. It continues to be the only interpreter of the ‘basic structure’ of the Constitution, an obstacle to Sangh efforts to eradicate Article 370, giving ‘autonomy’ to Kashmir, or to endowing Hinduism with a special status, whether or not

³³ In March 2018 Congress MPs circulated an impeachment motion calling for an inquiry into Misra’s ‘misbehaviour’. This was dismissed by the Head of the Rajya Sabha, despite ample *prima facie* evidence of wrongdoing, and Congress subsequently withdrew the motion. See Aditya A. K.’s litigation news report on the *Bar & Bench* website 29 March 2018.

the word ‘secular’ is removed from the Preamble. For such changes the BJP requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of Parliament, which is still some distance away.

In sum: there are some striking similarities between the two hegemonies. Both have drawn their support from the powerful states of the Hindi heartland, amplified by the first-past-the-post electoral system. Both dominate the national-political landscape, facing no rival party of the same order—unlike the two-party system in the US, for example. Both have charismatic leaders, who claim a special right to lead India—Nehru, through his role in the independence movement and social status; Modi, through his seemingly patriotic devotion to the cause of making India strong. For both, the principal enemies have been China and Pakistan. Both have used crushing force to impose national control over rebellious border regions. Both have, on occasion, permitted pogroms against Muslims to go unpunished. The two hegemonies have each exploited the intelligence services and the judiciary for their own political ends. Both have had close ties to big capital. Both have been fêted in the West. Yet there are strong contrasts between them, too—divergences both in style and in epoch. At leadership level, the aristocratic, Anglophone, jet-setting Nehru-Gandhi dynasty are worlds away from the plebeian piety of Modi, most at ease speaking Hindi or Gujarati. For mediating mechanisms and voter turnout, Congress relied on traditional relations of deference and dependence, especially in the countryside; the BJP, on cadre mobilization, social media and a lumpen-aspirational OBC social base. The use of religious ideology by Congress was latent; by the BJP, aggressive and overt. Other differences speak to the changing times. The main domestic enemy for Congress was communism; for the BJP, Islam. Nehruvian foreign policy was premised on (qualified) non-alignment, Modi’s on close alliance with the US against China.

3. DYNAMICS OF THE INTERREGNUM

What features of the long interregnum after Congress fed into the rise of the BJP? Two stand out. First, the failure of Congress developmentalism to lift mass living standards—the damning evidence of the Congress record on literacy and primary healthcare in the villages, as well as water, sanitation, electrification, roads—and the step-by-step shift to increasingly neoliberal policies as a solution, produced major

social tensions for which Congress could offer no persuasive hegemonic formula. In other words, Congress introduced the upheaval but proved incapable of managing the turmoil that resulted among different fractions of capital—one of the key tasks of a capitalist hegemon. The decade of the eighties proved critical.³⁴ Returned to office after the collapse of the 1977–79 Janata coalition that followed the Emergency, Indira Gandhi—and even more so her son Rajiv, after her assassination in 1984—turned from dirigisme to deregulation (for domestic and international capital) and repression (for labour). In successive moves, Congress lifted capital restrictions, pushed through the ‘de-licensing’ of the public sector to enable penetration by private capital, introduced tax concessions for business and higher-income brackets, freed up imports of machinery and consumer goods, cut subsidies for public-distribution schemes and brought in laws to crack down on strikes, go-slows and work-to-rule protests.³⁵ Politically, Congress moved towards a tighter partnership with the more modern, export-oriented sectors of big business that could compete more successfully in the de-regulated environment it was creating.

A post-statist vacuum

Socially, however, capital-intensive investment meant lower employment absorption and rising inequalities, leading to greater frustrations below. Agrarian capital, especially in the south and west, felt abandoned by Congress, while the businesses that had benefited most from import-substituting industrialization fretted about the influx of cheap foreign goods. These multi-layered discontents emerged into the ideological vacuum that followed the death of the developmentalist Nehruvian Consensus. The political outcomes were therefore uneven. Initially, the biggest beneficiaries of Congress’s electoral decline were regional forces, backed by huge agricultural lobbies, where the rich farmers came largely, though not exclusively, from the upper non-Brahmin castes and higher echelons of the OBCs, supported by a much larger stratum of aspiring middle peasants from lower OBC ranks. Agrarian capital, actual and aspiring, sought to use its ability to mobilize mass-voter support to

³⁴ Tactically, it was Indira Gandhi’s 1975–77 period of emergency rule that gave the Jan Sangh, precursor to the BJP, its springboard into national office when it joined the post-Emergency umbrella coalition of opposition parties under Morarji Desai.

³⁵ Atul Kohli, ‘Politics of Economic Growth in India, 1980–2005: Part I’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8 April 2006.

leverage provincial governments to enhance its relative power vis-a-vis industrial and urban-based capital. This was the short-lived period of 'Bharat'—the Hindi word for India—versus 'India'.³⁶

At the time, many saw the decline of the Congress as ushering in a 'second democratic upsurge', a kind of coming-of-age with the third generation after Independence. The new-found assertiveness of lower and 'other backward castes', along with the emergence of regional Dalit parties, was clearly a democratic development in a country that had been governed since Independence by a Brahmin family from Uttar Pradesh. India's immense diversity would now be expressed in the 'regionalization' of even national-level politics, making the Centre more responsive to public needs throughout the country, even if the price to be paid for this was an inevitable run of short-lived coalition governments. What this optimistic viewpoint failed to see was, first, how the politics of caste-identity assertion could promote harder variants of Hindu nationalism; and second, the extent to which socio-economic tensions and discontents were creating fertile political ground for the BJP/Sangh. Thus by the late eighties electoral pressure had mounted on the Congress, as opposition parties—V. P. Singh's Janata Dal, the CPI-M (from its base in West Bengal), the BJP and others—all rose in the polls.³⁷ It was at this point that the BJP launched its spectacular Ram Janmabhoomi campaign.

The Congress response to this upsurge in Hindu-nationalist militancy merely helped to pave the BJP's way. Indira Gandhi, on her return in the eighties from the post-Emergency wilderness, had encouraged RSS and Sangh followers to support her, thus widening her electoral base, at a time when she was opposing Sikh separatist militancy and the Jan Sangh was remodelling itself as the BJP. Her son Rajiv attempted to garner mass support by playing the twin religious cards of appeasing both Hindu and Muslim communal forces. First he upheld Muslim Personal Law, enacting legislation to overturn the Supreme Court

³⁶ In *The Painful Transition* (1990) I borrowed Stuart Hall's term 'authoritarian democracy' to describe the dynamics of the Indian polity in the 1980s and the risk that the balance between the two components was shifting for the worse.

³⁷ V. P. Singh was a former Congress minister expelled by Rajiv Gandhi for uncovering the immensely corrupt relations between the Congress leadership and international arms manufacturers, the Bofors Scandal. He led a coalition of smaller opposition parties, the National Front, which governed with the external, conditional support of the Left and the BJP from 1989 to 1991.

verdict mandating husbands to provide maintenance for wives they had divorced. Then, to counter charges of ‘Muslim appeasement’, he ordered the opening of the locked gates of the Babri mosque, allowing Hindu worship of the Ram idols that had illegally been placed there in 1949. This gave a dramatic fillip to the building of the Ayodhya movement. Congress continued on the same line after Rajiv’s assassination in 1991: for fear of offending ‘Hindu sentiment’, Congress Prime Minister Narasimha Rao did nothing to stop the campaign that would defy the Constitution, with impunity, by demolishing the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992—demonstrating the de facto sovereignty of the forces of Hindutva in defying the law. At the same time, Congress finance minister Manmohan Singh accelerated the turn to neoliberalism citing pressure from the IMF. Market de-regulation, external liberalization, financial reform, greater capital mobility and a harsher labour regime duly followed. With Congress unable to manage the tensions this created, opportunities opened up for another potential hegemon to expand and exercise national influence.

New pan-Hinduism

The second key factor in the interregnum period was the BJP’s ability to recast itself for bourgeois rule—or the Sangh’s ability to recast the BJP. Received wisdom had it that the BJP could only hope to gain national influence if it shed, or at least greatly moderated, its hard-line Hindu-nationalist ideological straitjacket, which would inevitably alienate the numerically vast lower-caste and Dalit electoral blocs. But this did not take place. Instead, the BJP succeeded in adjusting its class formula while keeping its ideological message intact—in fact, intensifying it, with a spate of religious-political processions, campaigns, pilgrimages and other forms of religiosity, mobilizing the golden chariots, warrior kings and stirring soundtrack of the *Ramayana*, in its countless film and TV versions, to calculated effect. The growing assertiveness of OBCs and Dalits did temporarily hamper the Sangh, but lessons were quickly learnt. From initially opposing positive discrimination—OBC reservations in Central government jobs and education—it accepted them. Meanwhile, the Hindutva spectacles generally met with approval and often mass participation from OBC ranks. Even if they still supported their own political vehicles, often regional parties, many responded to the invitation to seek emotional uplift and cultural mobility through identification with an ever-broader Hindu community, itself being transformed into the more

monolithic form that historian Romila Thapar has described as ‘syndicated Hinduism’.³⁸

The success of the BJP campaign was apparent within two short years. In 1996, the regional parties shunned the prospect of entering a coalition with the BJP—which, though the largest party in the Lok Sabha, could therefore rule for only thirteen days. By 1998 these parties had abandoned their not even skin-deep claims to secularism and joined the BJP in stitching up just such an alliance. The ongoing Hindutva-ization of OBCs then enabled the BJP to eat into the social and electoral bases of the regional parties, particularly in the northern half of the country. Simultaneously, it expanded its support among the top 15–20 per cent of the population. Corporate capital was looking for an alternative national party to protect and promote its interests, given Congress vicissitudes. If neoliberalism reflects a global trend in economic policy-making, it can only be stabilized in a given country by a corresponding shift in politics and ideology which, to be sustainable, must be made to express national specificities. Profit-making is primary: Indian capital always seeks domestic political stability. In quick time, the BJP shed its old ideological baggage of economic nationalism, with only feeble murmurs of dissent from a small section of the Sangh.

The first two BJP-led coalition governments of 1998–99 and 1999–2004, under Vajpayee, strengthened the hegemonic reach of the Sangh. Vajpayee and Advani, his Number Two, parachuted favoured bureaucrats into key positions and began the process of saffronizing the education system. Muslim madrasas were designated potential breeding-grounds for pro-Pakistani terrorists, justifying closer official scrutiny, while Sangh foot soldiers carried out scattered attacks on madrasas, dargahs and mosques. Central government resources were diverted to pro-Hindutva affiliates and NGOs. Strikingly, none of the BJP’s coalition partners quit over the May 1998 nuclear tests, when Vajpayee declared India an atomic power. Barring the Left, all other parties including the Congress soon enough endorsed the bomb in the name of a stronger India. The second test came with the Gujarat pogrom of 2002: what marked this as an ideological turning-point was that none of BJP’s allies, for all their mealy-mouthed criticisms, were prepared to pull the government down. The message for the Hindu supporters of these regional parties was to endorse the

³⁸ See ‘Syndicated Hinduism’ in Romila Thapar, *The Historian and Her Craft: Collected Essays and Lectures*, Vol. 4, New Delhi 2017.

BJP suggestion that the Muslims may have somehow ‘deserved’ their fate—hence no governmental retribution against the attacking Hindu mobs—and that there was therefore implicit merit in the Sangh claim about ‘Muslim appeasement’ having gone far enough.

The BJP fell in 2004 not because of any disillusionment with its ideology, though some were discomfited by Gujarat, but because of its economic record—the gains of ‘Shining India’ going largely to the urban middle class. More important, however, was the fact that Congress could stitch together an alliance with discontented regional parties.³⁹ Congress-led coalitions under Manmohan Singh then reigned for two full terms, till 2014, fostering illusions about the basic incompatibility between Indian heterogeneity and Hindutva homogeneity. But one of the main reasons why Congress won again in 2009—its vote rising a modest 2 per cent, yielding an additional 61 seats—was its introduction of the world’s largest ‘National Rural Employment Guarantee Act’. This was thanks to combined pressure from the civil-society organizations that had drafted the legislation and the Left parties, which supported it from outside the government. However modest its impact on the ground, NREGA provided incomes (for rural women, in particular), raised average wages in the countryside and, along with road-building and other construction projects, did make some difference. After 2009, however, the momentum behind NREGA slackened. High inflation and Congress corruption helped to discredit the ruling coalition—and provided ammunition for the BJP/RSS social-media campaigns targeting the 100 million first-time voters in the 2014 elections. In September 2013, after much back-room manoeuvring with the RSS, Modi was proclaimed the BJP prime ministerial candidate, side-lining Vajpayee and Advani. His landslide victory in May 2014 seems to have put paid to the notion that India was developing a stable two-party system.

4. WHAT NOW?

With the next election barely nine months away, the BJP/Sangh is clear about its short and long-term plans: over the next five years it hopes

³⁹ In fact, the BJP vote only fell from 24 to 22 per cent between 1999 and 2004, while its seat tally fell from 182 to 138. The Congress share of the vote actually dropped from 28 to 27 per cent, while its seat tally rose from 114 to 145, thanks to the distortions of the first-past-the-post constituency system.

to consolidate its hegemony, to be—as Congress once was—the only national player around which the ruling class can coalesce. For its part, the opposition cannot think beyond the next election. As always, the main weakness for an incumbent party in India is the state of the economy. The problems are structural and long precede Modi. Despite annual average growth of around 7 per cent, mass poverty persists and the rate of employment absorption is miserably low, while inequalities of income and wealth accumulate. Absolute poverty is around 30 per cent, but when cost assessments of basic needs like education, health care, housing and social security are taken into account, another 40 per cent fall into the category of the ‘vulnerable poor’, for whom the shock of a bad harvest, high inflation or a family illness can wreak havoc. The pattern has if anything worsened, mocking Modi’s slogan of *acche din* [good days] coming. For perhaps the first time since Independence, total employment actually fell between 2013–14 and 2015–16.⁴⁰ In November 2016, Modi’s flagship policy of demonetization—500 and 1,000 rupee notes (\$7 and \$14) were cancelled overnight and had to be deposited at banks, in a bid to crack down on the shadow economy—succeeded for a time in raising his stock as a class warrior for the un-corrupt poor. But it also accounted in part for a continuous economic slowdown across seven quarters between January 2016 and September 2017, raising costs for farmers while their incomes stagnated, as did rural wages. Nor have the corporate sector or international capital had the concessions they wanted from Modi, such as accelerated privatizations in public-sector enterprises, including banks. There have been few incentives to raise animal spirits or lift investment back to the level of 34 per cent of GDP that it enjoyed in 2011, from its present 27–29 per cent range.

It remains to be seen whether the BJP can handle the caste tensions it has been stoking. Cow-protection measures and vigilantism have hurt the cattle and leather industries, where the poor and Dalits are employed. News of the numerous incidents of harassment of Dalits by upper castes now spreads through social media. Mass Dalit anger

⁴⁰ Total employment dropped by 0.4 per cent, from 480.4 million to 467.6m, between 2013–14 and 2015–16. See Vinoj Abraham, ‘Stagnant Employment Growth’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 September 2017; Radhicka Kapoor, ‘A job crisis, in figures’, *Indian Express*, 13 December 2017. The ‘employment elasticity of output’ figure which averaged 0.4 between 1983 to 1993/4 fell to 0.01 in the last decade. Malini Goyal, ‘What needs to be done—and is being done—to employ more Indians, and to make them employable’, *Economic Times*, 21 May 2017.

erupted in April 2018 when tens of thousands came out on the streets in northern and western India, responding initially to a call by a relatively unknown Dalit group which dramatically snowballed on social media. The trigger was the March 2018 Supreme Court ruling on the Prevention of Atrocities Act, which is supposed to protect Dalits and Tribals from attack. In the name of ‘detering misuse’, the Court made it more difficult to charge and arrest those accused. The protests intensified after nine protesters were killed in BJP-ruled states, finally forcing the BJP to bring in a bill to overturn the ruling. So far the Sangh has had considerable success in dividing Dalits, who have their own sub-caste resentments, and has assiduously sought to woo them, not least by appropriating Ambedkar as a major Indian icon. It is a reminder that a key battlefield against the Sangh remains the caste question. In the crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, the new Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath has been appointing members of his own caste, the Thakurs (a non-Brahmin upper caste) to senior positions in the police and administration, and the Thakur community is aggressively using its muscles against other castes, both above and below.

Will Congress be able to cobble together an electoral coalition capable of taking advantage of these discontents? Easier said than done; at best this will be on opportunist grounds of sinking apart or swimming together. Nevertheless, in March 2018 the two biggest opposition parties in Uttar Pradesh—the SP, backed by the major OBC caste of Yadavs, and the BSP, backed by the majority Dalit caste of Jatavs—united to contest two state assembly seats and won both, to the great shock of the BJP, which had considered the seats impregnable.⁴¹ The May 2018 assembly elections in the southern state of Karnataka provided another indicator. Here, Congress managed to stitch up a governing coalition (with the help of the Supreme Court) even though the BJP had emerged as the single largest party. Indeed the BJP achieved its highest-ever vote share in Karnataka, testimony to how widely acceptable its ideology has become and to the inroads it has been making into the Indian South. But as far as the issue of hegemony goes, Hindutva was never put on trial in Karnataka—nor anywhere else, in these four years of Modi rule.

Although Modi is still ahead in the polls, the BJP may not get a second majority on its own and, while still most likely the single largest party,

⁴¹ SP: Samajwadi Party (Socialist Party); BSP: Bahujan Samaj Party (Downtrodden Party).

might need regional partners to form a coalition. The BJP/Sangh election pitch is already clear: 'protecting the nation' against those who would weaken it. The scarcely hidden finger is pointing, first, at the Kashmir Valley Muslims, accused of abetting home-grown and Pakistani 'terrorists'; and second, at Bangladeshi Muslim migrants to Assam and other north-eastern states, who are said to be taking jobs, land and welfare benefits from India's 'true' citizens. Kashmir is now under Governor's rule, directed from New Delhi, and repression there will be intensified in the run-up to the elections. In Assam, Congress brokered an Accord in 1985 whereby non-Indian citizens would be made stateless, if not deported. The National Register of Citizens has now produced a draft list that excludes over 4 million of Assam's total population of 33 million. The reality is that vast numbers of Indians have never possessed birth certificates, passports or formalized citizenship papers. The longer-term aim of the BJP was revealed in its Citizenship Amendment Bill—which, like the situation in Assam, will feature in its election campaign. The Bill would allow non-Muslim migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan to becoming naturalised Indian citizens in due course, reinforcing the idea of a 'Hindu India'. As we have seen, the hegemony of the BJP represents a qualitative hardening of Indian political culture. A decisive defeat for this powerful far-right bloc, so deeply engrained in the pores of Indian civil society, will require a major shift in the socio-political relationship of forces.