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# **Is India Becoming the ‘Hindu Rashtra’ Sought by Hindu Nationalists?**

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John Harriss, Craig Jeffrey and Stuart Corbridge



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## Is India Becoming the 'Hindu Rashtra' Sought by Hindu Nationalists?

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### Abstract:

Over the past 30 years, Hindu nationalism has risen to a position of dominance in Indian politics. Although the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party political wing of the 'family' of Hindu nationalist organisations, does not win electoral majorities all over the country, Hindu nationalist ideas – what we term 'banal Hindutva' – are now firmly part of everyday politics. This chapter traces the growth since the early twentieth century of organizations and movements that reject liberalism and secular understandings of the nation, through to the establishment of political dominance by the BJP under Narendra Modi. Thanks largely to Modi's inspiration, the BJP has effectively projected the idea of a 'new India' that is a land of hope and opportunity, downplaying the welfare state upon which most people's well-being depends. Our examination of the relationship between Hindutva, demonstrative religiosity and incidents of communal violence, mainly against Muslims, finds that there are many local reasons for the occurrence of inter-community tensions that can give rise to violence but whether they do or not depends heavily upon how governments act. The chapter both opens and concludes with accounts of majoritarian action under BJP governments since 2014, and argues that Narendra Modi's regime may be described as an instance of authoritarian populism.

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## Is India Becoming the 'Hindu Rashtra' Sought by Hindu Nationalists?

### Introduction\*

On March 19, 2017 a young monk, Yogi Adityanath, was sworn in as the chief minister of most populous of India's states, Uttar Pradesh (UP). This followed a remarkable victory in the elections to the state Legislative Assembly, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) succeeded in defying the expectations even of the party's own high command, never mind those of India's leading political pundits, and in winning 312 of 403 seats. Adityanath was reported to have been the unanimous choice for chief minister of the new BJP legislators – though it was widely believed that the appointment reflected the wishes of the prime minister, Narendra Modi, and of his principal lieutenant Amit Shah, president of the BJP. Adityanath was at the time serving his fifth consecutive term as MP for the constituency of Gorakhpur, in north eastern Uttar Pradesh, where he had been appointed as the Mahant, or head priest, of the Gorakhnath Mutt (monastery) in September 2014. In combining a political role with that of heading the Mutt, Adityanath continued a tradition extending back for a half a century – both his predecessors having been MPs for Gorakhpur (initially representing the Hindu Mahasabha – on which, see below) as well as Mahants (Jaffrelot 2014). But the appointment of the head of a religious institution as a state chief minister was unprecedented, and reflected – or so it appeared – the institutionalizing of the relationship between the Hindu religion and the state under the government of the BJP, following its triumph in the national elections of 2014. The party had then won an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha – the lower house of the Indian parliament – the first time this had been achieved for thirty years.

Adityanath's appointment shocked Indian liberals, not just because of the ascent of a Hindu religious leader to a very important political position (perhaps second only to that of the

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\* This is the draft of a chapter for a new edition of our book *India Today: Economy, Politics and Society* (First Edition: 2013, Cambridge: Polity Press). The text has benefited from comments made by Fernande Pool, Jeff Checkel, Chris Gibson and other colleagues of the School for International Studies at the School's regular Research Colloquium in October 2017.

prime minister, given the centrality of UP in Indian politics) in a country that proclaims secularism in its Constitution, but more because he is held to stand on the extreme fringe of a movement – the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the VHP, the ‘World Hindu Council’), an organization of Hindu religious leaders – that is itself seen as extreme. He started a youth organization, the Hindu Yuva Vahini, shortly after he was first elected (then as the youngest MP) to the Lok Sabha, and the Vahini was soon implicated, as was Adityanath himself, in communal violence in Gorakhpur and neighbouring districts. He has been described as “akin to a feudal lord who maintains his grip on his people and his writ runs over his territory through a mixture of religion, terror and personal loyalty” – in a poor, violent and crime-ridden part of the country (Katju 2017). A film clip of a meeting, shows Adityanath sitting impassively on a platform from which a member of the Vahini urged the Hindu audience to dig up the graves of Muslim women and rape the corpses. He made the idea of the ‘love jihad’ – a supposed Islamist conspiracy to seduce Hindu women and to convert them to Islam – a rallying cry, and he exhorted Hindus to convert a hundred Muslim women to Hinduism for every one Hindu woman converted to Islam. In 2005 he had led a ‘purification drive’ to convert Christians to Hinduism, and he was reported as having said “I will not stop until I turn the UP and India into a Hindu rashtra [Hindu state]”.

Adityanath became a passionate advocate of the *ghar wapsi* (‘homecoming’) campaign, driven by the VHP, that sought the conversion, or in its own terms, the ‘reconversion’ of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism, that gained in strength following the BJP victory of 2014. The *shuddhi* (purification) movement had been started in the 1920s, and was advocated by the Hindu nationalist leaders Veer Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar (Noorani 2015). But early in the twenty-first century it was taken up again in earnest by the Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the core organization of the *Sangh Parivar* – the family of organisations dedicated to Hindu nationalism – with the formation of a specialized outfit called the Dharm Jagram Manch (DJM). Donations were sought for funding conversions (more for Muslims than for Christians) and the DJM was reported to be receiving funding from the United States and Europe. The objective of the organisation, according to the leader of the DJM, in a press report of December 2014, was to ensure that there would be no Muslims or Christians left in India by the end of 2021. He explained that this didn’t mean that they would all be sent out of the country but rather that “they have to understand that they were originally Hindus and, keeping this in mind, adhere to Hindu

values and way of life". Implicitly this meant that Christians and Muslims could not expect equal citizenship of India unless they became Hindu (Ramakrishnan 2015a).

Yogi Adityanath's elevation to the chief ministership of the most populous state was seen, therefore, as marking a distinct shift in the stance of the BJP. Hitherto the BJP, in office, had tended always toward moderation, down-playing key issues for Hindu nationalists in the interests of maintaining broad political support, and often provoking criticism from the RSS, and the ire of the VHP (see Muralidharan 2003; Venkatesan 2003). Now, it seemed, the gloves were off. Narendra Modi, both in his electoral campaign in 2014, and in the earlier part of his prime ministership, had always emphasized his commitment to *vikaas*, to development, rather than to the objectives of Hindu nationalism. But now the objectives of *vikaas* and of the achievement of the Hindu rashtra – the Hindu state – were being brought together. *Time* magazine asked in an article whether Modi was “really a reformer focused on generating the jobs the country needs, or is the language of development, propagated via an unremitting stream of slogans, speeches and tweets by the prime minister and his top officials, actually a cover for *Hindutva*, an ideology that sees India as a Hindu nation?” In fact, as Kanchan Chandran argued, citing the *Time* article, “Modi has always been both a reformer and a Hindu nationalist, and this two-dimensional package is the essence of his appeal” (Chandra 2017).

In this chapter we outline the history of Hindu nationalism, and the steady spread of what we refer to as ‘banal *Hindutva*’ – or banal, everyday forms of Hindu nationalism – and its links with communal conflict (or what is more generally known as ethnic violence, here between religious communities). Such conflict may be both a reflection, and an instrument, of the rise of Hindu nationalism. We return, finally, to an account of how the move toward the Hindu rashtra accelerated under the BJP government after 2014, and compare this specifically Indian experience with manifestations of authoritarian populism in other parts of the world.

### **The RSS, the BJP, and the Struggle for *Hindutva***

Hindu nationalism began to develop alongside and even before ‘secular’ Indian nationalism. It has its origins in movements for religious revival and reform in the nineteenth century that responded to colonialism and to Christianity in a way that was both oppositional and

emulative. They sought to create the community of Hindus without, initially, invoking hostility to those of other faiths – though such ‘othering’ followed soon after. John Zavos, in his study of this early history (2000), argues that at this time there came together with religion a recognition of the need for ‘organization’ as an essential facet of modernity – Indians had to be better organized if they were to contend with colonial power. This is still emphasised by the RSS, which says on its English language website that “Strength ... comes only through organization (and that it) is therefore the duty of every Hindu to do his best to consolidate the Hindu society”. An early manifestation of this impulse was in the formation of Hindu ‘sabhas’ – distinctly modern organizations of Hindus – in different parts of the country, and the establishment in 1915 of the All India Hindu Sabha as a representative body for them. It was this body that became active as the Hindu Mahasabha in the 1920s, when Vinayak Damodar Savarkar became one of its leaders.

It was Savarkar who formulated the idea of *Hindutva* in a book with this title, written in English and so clearly intended for a middle class readership, first published in 1923. Both orthodox and reformist Brahmin intellectuals had by that time sought to find ‘an internal principle of unity’ in religion, but Savarkar tailored this “to emphasise territorial origin and broad cultural commonalities” (Khilnani 1997: 159-60). He effectively translated upper caste ideology – Kshatriya as much as Brahmin, given its emphasis on militancy and political power -- into a decidedly modern conception of ethnic nationalism. *Hindutva* is taken to mean ‘Hindu-ness’, but it is said, emphatically, not to be equated with Hinduism. It is an idea, rather, of a political community united by geographical origin, racial connection and a shared culture based on Sanskritic languages and ‘common laws and rites’ (*ibid*: 161). Savarkar writes:

A Hindu then is he who feels attachment to the land ... of his forefathers – as his Fatherland; who inherits the blood of the great race whose first and discernable source could be traced from the Himalayan altitudes ... and who ... has inherited and claims as his own the Hindu Sanskriti, the Hindu civilization ... (Savarkar 1923: 100)

*Hindutva* is, as the BJP now argues on its website – though without referring explicitly to Savarkar – “a nationalist and not a religious or theocratic concept”, and it describes the idea as one of ‘cultural nationalism’. Savarkar evidently intended to emphasise the unity of Hindus, irrespective of caste and other distinctions (which had cut across the endeavours of the early

Hindu nationalists), while at the same explicitly 'othering' Muslims and Christians, who "cannot be recognized as Hindus; as since their adoption of the new cult they had ceased to own Hindu civilization as a whole" (1923: 100-1). Savarkar's primary concern may have been with the organization of Hindus, but hostility to Islam and to Christianity was the inevitable corollary. Hindu nationalists, subsequently, including leaders of the BJP, though they have claimed to adhere to religious pluralism, in others of their statements have clearly expressed anti-Muslim or anti-Christian sentiments.

The Constitution of India defines the state as "secular", but the conception of secularism adopted by the authors of the Constitution took it as meaning equality of treatment of different faiths by the state, rather than clear separation between the affairs of the state and religion. The Government of India, however, subsequently allowed both Muslims and Christians to follow the personal and family laws that are intrinsic to their religious traditions – as implied by the freedom of religion laid down in Article 25 – but undertook reform of the civil code affecting Hindus, in line with liberal principles. This has exposed the state to vigorous charges from Hindu nationalists, of being only "pseudo-secular". Some, notably those associated with the publishing house Voice of India, who accuse even the RSS of being 'soft', contrast the 'intolerance' of the monotheistic religions with the 'tolerance' of Hinduism. They then find in this reason for wishing to suppress these other religions and to propagate what is in effect a theology of hatred – without perceiving in the least the bitter irony in this (Nanda 2009: 160-68).

*Hindutva* ideas have animated the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh from its foundation by Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in 1925. Since that time the *Sangh* has always sought to bring about a kind of a social revolution from below, not by taking over state power, but through the establishment of a highly disciplined organization, and the disciplining (through exercise) of the bodies of young men in the daily meetings of its local cells, or *shakhas* – of what has been called 'the brotherhood in saffron' – capable of spreading and inculcating into people the *Hindutva* idea of the nation. The organization depends upon the activities of full-time activists and progandists – *pracharaks* – of whom prime minister Narendra Modi was once one. The RSS has recognized the importance of basic education – in remarkable contrast with the egregious failures of the Indian state in this regard. The Indian state, rather strangely by comparison with many others,

has not sought to promote Indian nationalism through basic education nearly as much as it might have done, had education been made more of a priority (though as Véronique Bénéï explains, there certainly is a lot of attention given to ‘nation building’ for those who do go to school. Bénéï 2001, 2008). The RSS, however, because it has played a significant part in the shaping of modern Hindi, has ensured that “moralising within a (Hindu) revivalist world view became entrenched in school text-books” (Kumar 1993: 544). There are as many as 70 000 schools across the country that are under its management (Panikkar 2001), and ethnographic research by Peggy Froerer has shown how successful these can be in inculcating the ideas and values of *Hindutva* specifically in rural, *adivasi* areas, and in opposition to the work of Christian missions and their schools (Froerer 2007).

To further its aims the RSS has also built up its ‘family’ of organizations, the *Sangh Parivar*, within which the BJP is the formal party political member. The party has its origins in the Jana Sangh, established in 1951 by S. P. Mookerji, a former President of the Hindu Mahasabha, and which maintained both a close but never straightforward relationship with the RSS, and a significant though minor role in north Indian politics until it joined the ruling Janata coalition in government in 1977-1980. Following the unraveling and the defeat of that coalition, members of the Jana Sangh and of the RSS regrouped, in 1980, as the Bharatiya Janata Party. After winning only two seats in the Lok Sabha elections of 1984, the BJP made rapid electoral advances thereafter, and by the 1990s rivaled the Indian National Congress as the most significant national – rather than only regional – political party. As well as the BJP, the *Sangh Parivar* includes most notably the VHP – founded in 1964 specifically to confront the perceived threat from Christianity – and the Bajrang Dal, a youth movement set up by the VHP in 1984, and that has sometimes supplied its ‘shock troops’ for attacks on minorities. It includes as well organizations for students, for women, for education and social service and for cultural activities.

Since the later 1980s there is no doubt that there has been a significant shift in India’s political culture, such that *Hindutva* has claimed the imaginations of an important share of both elites and the masses – except in south India – to an extent that was not true before (Palshikar 2015). For all the considerable strengths of the *Sangh Parivar*, however, the success that it has had in bringing about this shift, is due as much or more, to the failures of the Congress party. In

spite of its electoral strength in the early 1980s, the Congress lost direction, especially in the time of Rajiv Gandhi's prime ministership (1984-89), leaving a vacuum in Indian politics and creating a space for the rise of Hindu nationalist politics, articulated by the BJP but with the vigorous support of other members of the *Parivar*. This culminated, at last, in 1998, in the electoral success of the BJP (Corbridge and Harriss 2000, chapter 5). A critical event in this history was the destruction of the old mosque, the Babri Masjid, at Ayodha in December 1992, subtly orchestrated by leaders of the BJP (as the official commission of enquiry, the Liberhan Committee, finally reported to parliament in 2009), which marked the high point of Hindu nationalist agitation, and tested the Indian polity as never before. But by this time, too, the weaknesses of the Congress party organization and of the governments of India from the mid-1980s had led a good many senior ex-officials and servicemen, and members of the upper middle classes more generally, to look to the BJP as capable of supplying stronger, less corrupt government, that would enable India to attain the more significant place in the world to which many of them believed their country was entitled by virtue of its size and history. The message of *Hindutva*, mediated by the BJP, seemed to promise that India would take its 'rightful' place amongst the nations of the world only if Indians were truly 'themselves' – that is 'Hindu' – rather than trying to emulate the West (Hansen 1996). The widespread euphoria in India over the testing of a nuclear bomb in 1998, shortly after the BJP took over leadership of the government of India for the first time, clearly reflected these sentiments.

In the 1996 general election the BJP had won most seats in an inconclusive election, in spite of securing a much smaller share of the vote than the Congress (see Table 1). Atal Behari Vajpayee, the leader of the BJP, was invited by the President to form a government, but this lasted only 13 days before being defeated in a vote of confidence. This experience led the party to recognize the compulsions of power, the need to build an electoral coalition with other parties, and that for this to be possible it had to be ready to soften its stance on some issues that are seen as being central to the project of Hindu nationalism – the critical matters having to do with building a temple at Ayodhya, with the civil code (those matters of personal law over which the *Sangh Parivar* has claimed that the Hindu majority is disadvantaged by comparison with the religious minority communities), and with the question of Article 370 of the Constitution concerning the special status of Kashmir (opposed by Hindu nationalists). Further elections in

February 1998 finally brought the BJP into office, in a coalition government, but it was brought down by the defection of a coalition partner after only a little more than one year. At last, in September-October 1999 the party, at the head of a coalition (the National Democratic Alliance [NDA]) with 13 other partners, won a majority that enabled it to govern for a full term.

The BJP-led government, constrained as it was by the demands of coalition partners, largely disappointed the hopes and aspirations of the RSS and of the VHP for the advance of the *Hindutva* project, as we noted earlier (and see Jaffrelot 2010). But it presided over a period of increasingly successful economic growth, and in January 2004 the party seemed to be riding high. The BJP leader and prime minister, Vajpayee, confidently called an early general election for April-May 2004. The party set out to fight those elections on the strength of Mr Vajpayee's own credibility as a proven, respected prime minister, and on the platform of 'India Shining' – the idea of India as a now successful country taking its rightful place as one of the leaders amongst the nations of the world.

The hubris of Indian Shining was soon to be exposed. In the general election of 2004 the BJP lost to a Congress-led coalition that came to call itself the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), as a result not of any great shift in national politics but rather because of the outcomes of the different contests in the various major states. Still, the vote share of the BJP declined again nationally (see Table 1), from the peak of more than 25 per cent of the electorate as a whole that it had achieved in 1998; and the party's vote share declined even further in the next general election of 2009, to less than 19 per cent of the electorate. In these elections, to the surprise of

**Table 1. BJP and Congress in electoral competition.**

Election	Vote (%) BJP	Vote (%) Congress	Seats BJP	Seats Congress
1991	20.04	35.66	120	244
1996	20.29	28.80	161	140
1998	25.59	25.82	182	141
1999	23.75	28.30	182	114
2004	22.16	26.53	138	145
2009	18.80	28.55	116	206
2014	31.34	19.52	282	44

many, the Congress succeeded in increasing its number of seats quite dramatically, even if not its share of the popular vote, and in securing a strong position for the United Progressive Alliance in the new parliament. The remarkable rise of the BJP appeared to have been checked.

But this did not mean that the rise of Hindu nationalism had been halted, given the many ways in which India has become, remarkably perhaps, 'more Hindu'. As one writer put it, in the title of a book, "globalization is making India more Hindu" (Nanda 2009). Hindu religiosity has become more and more publicly apparent, through temple construction and renovation – some of it involving Non-Resident Indians, mostly from North America; through the renewal and the invention of ritual; and through the actions and the followings of new religious leaders or 'gurus'. Any semblance of separation between religion and the state has long gone, and there is now – Nanda suggests – a 'state-temple-corporate complex' that has rendered Hindu nationalism banal: "The banal, everyday Hindu religiosity is simultaneously breeding a banal, everyday kind of Hindu nationalism" (Nanda 2009: 140). This is the kind of banal nationalism that, for instance, leads mostly young men to attack other young people who want to celebrate Valentine's Day – something that has taken off in India substantially because of the huge success of a leading manufacturer of greetings cards in selling Valentine cards – or to try to stop young middle class women from behaving in ways that the young Hindu men consider 'un-Hindu'.

It was not only everyday Hindu nationalism that flourished in spite of the political defeats of the BJP. There is also often a violent edge to Hindu nationalism that shows no sign of decline. These trends go some way to accounting for the resurgence of the BJP in the general elections of 2014. Even as late as mid-2013, in spite of the evident failings of the UPA government in its second term, mired as it was in major corruption scandals that seemed to immobilize it, most commentators reckoned that the BJP was in almost as bad a shape as the Congress party. At that time the claim made by Sumantra Bose that "Coalition governments in New Delhi are a certainty for the foreseeable future" (Bose 2013: 109) appeared unexceptional. How was it, then, that the BJP was able to secure an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha in 2014? It came about, very largely, because of the personality of the man chosen by the BJP in September 2013 as its candidate for the position of prime minister, Narendra Modi, and the remarkable election campaign that he fought. Modi did not need to rely much himself on Hindu nationalist rhetoric,

given the extent of banal *Hindutva* – while his record as chief minister of Gujarat at a moment when the most devastating outbreak of communal violence in independent India took place in the state, in 2002, meant that his credentials, for ardent Hindu nationalists, were unquestionable.

On February 27 2002 one of the carriages of a train carrying *kar sevaks* (volunteers) from Ayodhya was set on fire by a mob, reportedly of Muslims, in the railway station of the town of Godhra, killing 59 people. In the immediate aftermath there was an orgy of violence against Muslims across the northern and central parts of Gujarat (the geography of violence is significant, as we will explain) with the evident connivance and even encouragement of the forces of the state. The events were described as a pogrom. Muslim businesses as well as homes were quite systematically destroyed and reports showed that members of the middle and upper classes of Gujarati society, as well as lumpens, were involved in looting of them. The attacks were not confined to the towns and cities and *adivasis* in particular joined in attacks in rural areas – reflecting in part the success of the educational work carried on among them by the RSS. Hindu spiritual leaders of Gujarat remained silent. Not only were politicians and the state involved in the perpetration of violence, but the government of Gujarat was quite blatantly partisan in its subsequent response, in the provision of relief to victims and in blocking efforts to secure justice for them (Chandhoke 2009; Yagnik and Sheth 2005, Chapter 11; and Chandhoke et al. 2007).

It might have been thought that these horrific events, condemned by the BJP leaders at the centre, albeit with riders about the responsibility of Muslims themselves for what had happened, would have given rise to revulsion against the politicians who had been implicated in them and have reinforced the voice of the secular opponents of communalism. In the state elections that followed not long afterwards, however, in December 2002, the BJP – led by Narendra Modi, who conducted a vicious campaign, making many stridently anti-Muslim statements – swept to a third consecutive victory (then almost unprecedented in the see-saw world of Indian state politics). The National Executive of the party claimed that “The people of Gujarat endorsed our commitment to cultural nationalism and voted us back for a third time in a row”. But what was so striking about the election results was that the BJP “won 52 of the 65 violence-affected Assembly constituencies on the basis of a twelve percentage point swing

...(while) ... elsewhere in the State, where the impact of violence was muted or weak, the contest was more normal and the BJP suffered setbacks” (“Editorial” 2002). The constituencies in which the BJP was particularly successful were also those that had previously been held by Congress – so the victories seem clearly to have signaled “that Hindutva mobilization through communal riots was successful” (Yagnik and Seth 2005: 285). Gujarat was described by the BJP as ‘the laboratory for *Hindutva*’, and as the verdict of the 2002 elections showed – repeated in 2007 and again in 2012 – the state has become the bastion of Hindu nationalism. This record, and the success that Modi was able to claim for the Gujarat ‘Model for Development’, given the state’s growth performance, were the platform for his successful general election campaign in 2013-14, when the BJP secured an absolute majority in the lower house of parliament.

### **Temples, Gods and Gurus: Banal Hinduism, Banal *Hindutva***

“God is Back” is the title of a book by two writers for *The Economist* (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009) who document the resurgence of religion very widely across the contemporary world, and its implications; and as the anthropologist Jean Comaroff has put it, ‘uncool passion’, or in other words, religion of revelation as opposed to that of deliberately (‘coolly’) chosen faith, “is among us once more, ministering to a reality that seems at odds with the tenets of secular reason” (2008: 14). It might be thought that an argument about the resurgence of religion does not apply to India, for it is part of many Indians’ own self-perception as well as of that of outsiders, that theirs has always been, and remains a distinctly religious and deeply spiritual society (as Gandhi, indeed, argued). It may or may not be true that Indian society is especially religious – but even if it is true it is still the case that there is abundant evidence of the resurgence of popular Hinduism in recent years. “God is Back” was also the title of the cover feature of the Indian news magazine *Outlook* in its issue for August 21, 2000; and it was a striking finding of the State of the Nation Survey conducted by the Delhi-based Centre for Study of Developing Societies in 2007, that urban, educated Indians are more religious than their rural and illiterate counterparts (though one might question how well a survey can take account of different meanings associated with religion). The conviction of modernization theorists that industrialization must inevitably bring about secularization, both in the sense that individuals no longer experience the need for belief in the supernatural, and in that of the separation of state and

religion – which becomes restricted to the private sphere – is clearly confounded by contemporary changes, in India as elsewhere in the world (Nanda 2009, chapter 5). Indeed, it is doubtful whether ‘modern’ societies have ever been as ‘disenchanted’ with religious experience as classical sociologists thought would be the case.

Research on the religious beliefs and practices of owners and managers of big companies in the south Indian city of Chennai provides some insights into the processes of modernization in Indian society. The anthropologist Milton Singer published in 1972 an influential book, entitled *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*, and its ‘capstone’ (as one reviewer put it) was a long essay about ‘industrial leaders’ based mainly on interviews conducted in Madras (as the city was then called) in 1964. Singer was especially interested in big business people because he thought that they were those who must be at the cutting edge of modernization, so that it would be through them that he could best study Indian modernity. For similar reasons, John Harriss chose to study people of the same social class but in the context of globalization, in a study that substantially replicated Singer’s, carried out nearly four decades later (Harriss 2003).

Singer found that, contrary to what he believed that Weber had argued in his comparative research on different religious traditions, there is in Hinduism a set of beliefs quite comparable with those that Weber (in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) had identified in Calvinism and thought conducive to the development of capitalism. The interpretations of the scriptural text the *Bhagavad Gita* that were current amongst business people in the 1960s – and are still – offer striking parallels with Calvinism (as well as tying in closely with a burgeoning self-improvement literature in contemporary India). There was, Singer argued, an ‘industrial theodicy’, representing the ‘modernization’ of Hinduism without secularization. For the industrial leaders of Madras:

‘the essentials of Hinduism’ consist more in a set of beliefs and a code of ethical conduct than in a set of ritual observances. In this sense, the effect of industry is to change the traditional conception of the essentials of Hinduism from an emphasis on the correct ritual observances and family disciplines to an emphasis on philosophical principles, devotional faith, and right conduct (Singer 1972: 342)

John Harriss observed, however, in his later study of big business people in Chennai, that – though one or two amongst them expressed themselves as being uninterested in religion – most

showed a great deal of interest in and involvement with temple-going and public worship, following 'god-men' and gurus, and in the miraculous and ecstatic religion, as well as in the philosophical principles of what is called (by some of them) 'the Vedic Heritage'. Several of the big business houses of the city supported the work of a particular religious teacher, or guru, Swami Dayananda Saraswathi (1930-2015), who operated both in the United States and in India, who taught in English – in Chennai to packed middle class audiences, who was active in the VHP, and was a guru to Narendra Modi. Modi tweeted after Saraswathi's death that his demise "is a personal loss". The foundation that was associated with him, funded by some of the business houses, produced a 'Vedic Heritage' teaching kit directed at the education of middle class children in India and in North America.

Others of the 'industrial leaders' of present day Chennai who are active followers of more traditional religious teachers – as were some of their predecessors in the 1960s – spoke freely of their experiences of the miraculous. The dusty Chennai suburb of Nanganallur, where some IT companies are located, has seen a wave of construction of new temples – one of them the site of a massive idol of Hanuman, the monkey god of the *Ramayana*, who is increasingly the object of middle-class devotion – and is the home of a 'god-man' followed by some of the IT entrepreneurs, and with whom, too, miracles are associated. The notion of the clear separation of religion and business affairs, that Singer referred to as 'compartmentalization' – an idea familiar to at least one of the businessmen, who has read Singer's work – is flatly rejected by Chennai's contemporary industrial leaders.

Religious activities of these kinds, and the frank religiosity that is shown by many big businessmen in Chennai, are shared in very widely amongst members of India's 'new middle class', and across the country as a whole. Jean Comaroff presents evidence showing how, in recent decades, in different parts of the world, the hegemony of rationalist ideology has been disturbed, by tendencies that argue for the redemptive force of affect in human life (2008: 2). In India temple building and restoration, the popularity of the invented tradition of what are actually new religious rituals, and the large followings of gurus and religious teachers who appeal to middle class professionals, some of them by claiming that modern science has only rediscovered ideas and principles that are to be found in ancient Sanskrit texts, are widespread (as Meera

Nanda's account shows: 2009). In Chennai, at least, all of this may not be quite as new as the comparison of Harriss's account with Singer's might suggest, for Singer's fieldwork notes (found in an archive in the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago) show that he too encountered ideas and practices in 1964 not unlike those that were found commonly in 2000. That he set these observations aside in his published work and rather emphasized the 'industrial theodicy' was probably a reflection, at least in part, of the concern of the businessmen themselves in 1964 to project an image of being 'modern' citizens of the secular Nehruvian state. Their successors, however, no longer feel any such inhibitions, and some of them quite clearly express the idea, dear to the *Sangh Parivar*, that in order to be strong India must be 'Hindu'.

The regular appearance of political leaders and politicians and of senior civil servants at temple functions contributes to the impression that the state really is identified, in practice, with Hinduism. And in these days of public-private partnership it is wholly unsurprising that there should be collaboration between the state and the corporate sector in the support of religion – in 'the state-temple-corporate complex'. Some of the most senior Indian businessmen appear alongside the politicians at temple functions. Actions of this kind, and the way in which, as Véronique Bénéï has shown in an ethnographic study, Hindu symbols and ideas are woven into the everyday routines of physical exercise and recitation in schools, immediately directed at building national consciousness, actually inculcate 'banal Hinduism' – that is, familiar, unquestioned, everyday religious practice. Bénéï found that teachers who were not at all sympathetic to militant Hindu nationalism saw nothing wrong "with Hinduism being taught in school as part of 'Hindu culture'", just as, these days, there is nothing at all questionable for most people about the association of politicians and of the state with religious observance. As Bénéï goes on to say "many people – even those not belonging to the Hindu fold – conceive of Indian culture and the Indian nation as essentially Hindu, without this conception *necessarily* being accompanied by any communalist claim or politically militant Hindu identity. Such is the ambiguity of Hinduism as both culture *and* religion. It is on this very ambiguity that militant religious nationalists play" (2001: 212, emphasis in the original).

There is a certain ambiguity, too, in the teachings of some of the gurus to whom middle class Indians are attracted. Swami Dayananda Saraswathi argued that Hinduism is not *a* religion,

but simply 'religion', and that it encompasses diversity. It actually embraces all the ideas that are found in Islam or in Christianity in a way that is much more cogent than are these 'founder religions'. But at the same time Saraswathi wittily belittled these other religious traditions, asserting the greatness of Hinduism, and decrying religious conversions as a kind of violence. His arguments may not have been intended to justify religious violence in response, but they could certainly be taken as having that implication. He ended one of his sermons with the words "Strength is being what you are. You are a nobody if you don't know that. It is in this sense that Hindus must be strong". Everyday religiosity, 'banal Hinduism', that has been increasing in contemporary India, can easily slip into acceptance of Hindu nationalist ideas. They too become familiar, accepted, everyday – 'banal *Hindutva*'. This is the way in which the 'saffronisation' of state and society that Christophe Jaffrelot detects, is taking place, whether the BJP is in power, or not; or as the political analyst Suhas Palshikar has put it, public opinion generally has been tilted towards *Hindutva*. The BJP has increasingly taken over the centre ground of Indian politics, while at the same time the centre ground has become increasingly majoritarian (Palshikar 2015).

### **Banal *Hindutva*, Communal Violence and the State**

Michael Billig, who invented the idea of 'banal nationalism', associates it with "the flag hanging unnoticed on a public building" (cited by Nanda 2009: 140). Hindu nationalist ideas have penetrated the public discourse in India in such a way that they too are almost unnoticed for much of the time. But flags are sometimes waved with passion, as Billig also says, and so too is *Hindutva* associated with popular passion, as was seen so strikingly in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and in the many riots around the national *yatras* (processions across the country), carried on by BJP leaders, that preceded it. Though Hindu nationalism has become part of the everyday common-sense of many Indians, therefore, it is not always 'banal'. The state, as we have said, has become identified, increasingly, with Hinduism, and it plays a significant role in regard to the communal conflict – incidents of violence between people from different religious communities – that has become both reflection and driver of the rise of Hindu nationalism.

Steven Wilkinson observes that though there were serious communal riots in the 1960s and 1970s, there was no sense then that the integrity of the nation was under any threat from religious polarization and violence. This changed in the succeeding decades, substantially if not entirely because of Hindu nationalist agitation (Wilkinson 2005: 1-3), as was brought out in Asghar Ali Engineer's documentation and analysis of riots from the early 1980s (Engineer 1984). And Paul Brass concludes from his detailed studies of the city over many years that "though many communal riots in Aligarh and elsewhere in India have involved persons and parties not part of the *Sangh Parivar*, militant Hindus have played a central role in every large-scale riot in Aligarh at least since 1961, however electorally weak or strong they were" (2003a). Brass's analysis of the way in which religious violence is produced in that city, and elsewhere, shows the presence of "a network of actors, groups and connections ... whose effect is to keep a town or city in a permanent state of awareness of Hindu-Muslim relationships". What he calls the "institutionalized riot systems" that are created by these networks produce violence (there is an explicit imagery of theatre here. Brass 1997: 284). It is hard to say, however, whether such systems exist generally, and other ethnographies suggest the likely importance of particular contingent and conjunctural factors.

Philippa Williams, for example, was doing research in Varanasi (Benares) in North India at the time of a terrorist attack in March 2006, when bombs were exploded at the Sankat Mocha temple, killing 21 people, and two more people were killed a little later in further blasts at a railway station. The city had not previously been immune from communal clashes and it was feared that tensions would erupt in violence again as a result of the bombs. That they did not has understandably quite complex and very particular causes, according to Williams' analysis (2007), but she highlights the significance of the agency of particular individuals, and it appears from her account that the determination of the chief priest (*mahant*) of the Sankat Mocha temple that radical Hindu politics must be kept out of the religious space of the temple, played an especially important part. The *mahant* successfully foiled attempts by a BJP leader to exploit the attack for political ends.

Of course each individual case of the outbreak of ethnic violence has its own particular explanation. But Brass's argument, and even more that of Steven Wilkinson in his attempt to

develop a general explanation for communal violence, emphasizes the over-arching importance of the response of the state. Brass says “where the policy of a state government is decisively opposed to communal riots ... riots will be either prevented or contained” (2003a); while Wilkinson states, as forcefully, “state-level patterns of law enforcement dominate local factors – state law enforcement can prevent violence even in so-called riot-prone towns and facilitate it even in towns with no previous history of riots” (2004: 17). There are many local reasons for the occurrence of inter-community tensions that can give rise to violence but whether they do or not depends heavily upon how governments act.

The question then arises of what factors account for differences in governments’ responses. Wilkinson’s answer, based on careful statistical and historical analysis of rioting in different Indian states and in several other countries, is that much depends on the extent and nature of electoral competition. His key finding is that politicians in highly fractionalized political systems have incentives to provide security to minorities “in order to retain their electoral support today and the option of forming coalitions with minority supported parties tomorrow” (2004: 237). In these circumstances even anti-minority politicians may be constrained to prevent ethnic violence – as happened in some Indian states in 2002 after the Godhra incident. At that time BJP politicians in Gujarat, a state with a low level of party competition and one in which they did not have to depend on any support from the Muslim minority, accurately calculated that they could reap political dividends from the violence. Meanwhile other state governments, in more competitive electoral environments, or those in which the ruling party depended on Muslim support, prevented riots (Wilkinson 2004: 154-60). Political competition, then, forces compromises – of the kind that the BJP has been constrained to make in order to win and to retain power. The culpability of militant Hindu nationalists, however, for many incidents of communal violence, in circumstances in which they are not subject to such political constraints, is quite plain.

Amrita Basu, in an analysis of the circumstances of the intermittent violence of Hindu nationalists against minorities, persuasively advances two theses. First, that Hindu nationalist anti-minority violence is more likely when the BJP, with close ties with the RSS and VHP, has achieved power in one of India’s states, and the national government has effectively condoned

their actions. Second, that Hindu nationalist forces are more militant where upper castes/classes are strong and fully support the BJP, and lower caste/class parties and movements are weak. These factors came together in Gujarat in 2002 in a ‘perfect storm’ – an unprecedented convergence of forces – as Basu shows in detail (Basu 2015).

If Basu’s argument is broadly correct, and Jaffrelot’s parallel one about the moderating effect of the constraints of coalition politics on the BJP, or Wilkinson’s on the way in which political competition can make for compromise, we are led back to the question with which this chapter began. Having reduced the hitherto major national party, the Congress, in the 2014 elections, to only 44 seats in the Lok Sabha (so that, not commanding ten per cent of the seats in the house, it could not even be recognized as the official opposition party), and won an absolute majority; with its crushing victory in the crucial legislative assembly elections in UP in 2017; and by that time holding power in 13 of the 29 major states, the BJP established itself as unquestionably the dominant national party. Suhas Palshikar confirmed this view, in an article entitled ‘India’s Second Dominant Party System’ (harking back to the way in which political scientists referred to the dominance of the Congress party in the 1950s), writing that:

In 2014, Modi’s handsome victory inaugurated a new framework of party competition. The BJP emerged as the dominant party not in mere numeric terms, but more substantively. It stretched to a large number of states, received support from a cross-section of society, placed the leadership factor at the centre of competitive politics and above all, set the tone for political debates (2017: 14).

The question is: has this dominance, and the BJP’s control over the state, been translated into the assertion of the *Hindutva* agenda? Is India becoming, indeed, the Hindu rashtra?

## ***Hindutva* Rising**

To begin with, certainly, the new BJP government in 2014, its majority notwithstanding, in line with Modi’s campaign in the election, which had been focused on development, seemed not to emphasise the *Hindutva* agenda (Palshikar 2015). The prime minister himself assured religious minorities of protection, and distanced himself from some of the more extreme statements made by BJP politicians. But the government effectively created a space, nonetheless, in which it increasingly became possible for Hindu majoritarian sentiments to be expressed – as

in the rhetoric of 'love jihad' and in the campaigning over *ghar wapsi* (to 'reconvert' Muslims and Christians to Hinduism) that we described at the beginning of this chapter – and for there to be more or less open attacks on minorities. Over time the language of BJP politicians, as well as of the leaders of the RSS and the VHP, became increasingly blatant in support of such actions (as Palshikar 2015 documents). By 2017, when the BJP successfully fought the legislative assembly elections in UP without appointing a single Muslim candidate – in a state in which Muslims make up 20 per cent of the population – there was no doubt that, as the senior journalist Siddharth Varadarajan put it, “Muslims in UP and elsewhere in India are already marginalized economically and politically, and their apprehension is that things are going to get worse from here on” (in *The Wire* 12 March 2017). The civil society leader Harsh Mander commented, even before the UP events, in a public forum in Kerala in January 2017, on the lack of outrage in the country “at the way Muslims have been made second class citizens over the last two years”.

A particular focus for the mobilization of Hindu majoritarian sentiment was over the issue of cow protection – the animal being sacred for Hindus. Cow protection has a long history, and it was central to the formation of Hindu nationalism even in the later nineteenth century (Zavos 2000: 81-87). In the 1920s Gandhi tried to reason with Hindu nationalists that, as a Hindu himself, he too felt strongly about the protection of cows, but that this principle should not be served by attacking Muslims. The Constitution of India, at Article 48, among the (non-justiciable) Directive Principles, committed the state only to 'take steps' toward prohibiting the slaughter of cattle – a response to the Hindu sentiment that predominated in the Constituent Assembly. Article 21, however, amongst the Fundamental Rights, that are justiciable, and which guarantees 'personal liberty', has been interpreted as embracing the right to privacy, and this the right of the individual to eat what he or she chooses. And in practice, though it has been regulated, the slaughter of cattle has always been permitted in India. But state governments led by the BJP in Maharashtra and Haryana, in 2014-15 passed laws banning cow slaughter, and in April 2017 the chief of the RSS, Mohan Bhagwat, called for a national ban on cow slaughter – though he did admit that it would take time to implement such legislation, given the diversity within the country (reported in *Indian Express* April 10 2017).

These official moves and pronouncements both encouraged and responded to the mobilization of cow protection vigilantism. In a particularly notorious incident, on September 28, 2015 a Muslim, Mohammed Akhlaq, was lynched in the village of Bisara in the Dadri region of Western Uttar Pradesh, following the broadcasting of messages by a local temple claiming that he and his family had engaged in cow slaughter, and were storing and consuming beef. Meat was found in Akhlaq's refrigerator – which later tests showed, however, to be mutton. But by that time Akhlaq was dead, and his name was entering the vocabulary of north India – in the verbal form, 'to be akhlaqed'. A Union Minister said that the incident was an accident; both a Member of Parliament from the BJP and a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad said that all those who 'indulged' in cow slaughter would meet with Akhlaq's fate. The prime minister took public notice of the event only on October 8. Even then he did not openly condemn the killing, but said only that Hindus and Muslims should not be fighting each other but getting together to fight poverty (see Ramakrishnan 2015b). Subsequently, some of those responsible for Akhlaq's murder, far from being punished, have actually been rewarded by the state.

The murder of Akhlaq was not the only case involving accusations of cow slaughter. "Across India", it was reported in the British press, "there have been increasing reports of violence involving *gau raksha* gangs – whose members (*gau rakshaks*) number in thousands – that patrol highways and country roads at night, hunting for cattle being smuggled to Bangladesh, or the few Indian states where slaughtering the animals is allowed" (Safi 2016). Officials in Uttar Pradesh, in 2015, reported around one hundred major and minor cases of assault in which the accusation of cow slaughter was said to have been the cause (Ramakrishnan 2015b). In August 2016 an attack on another Muslim family in a village in Haryana, involving murder and rape, was carried out by cow protection volunteers. The incident was trivialised by the BJP chief minister. Along the highway in the state Muslim stallholders were subjected to inspections – by uniformed police rather than by *gau rakshaks* – to check whether the meat they were selling was cow or buffalo, even though the Haryana Cow Protection Department had no laboratory facilities for testing the meat. Stallholders chose to close down, rather than run the risk of being 'aklaqed' (personal communication from Harsh Mander). It has not been only Muslims who have been subjected to violence. In July 2016, four Dalit boys in the village of Una in Gujarat were stripped and thrashed by *gau rakshaks*, though they had only been skinning a

dead cow. This last incident, in the prime minister's state, led to widespread condemnation, to the development of a protest movement amongst Dalits, and to concerns in the BJP about the upsetting of its stratagems for winning Dalit support (see reports in *Frontline* August 19 and September 2 2016).

In April 2017 a Muslim dairy farmer died following an attack by *gau rakshaks* in Rajasthan (*Indian Express* April 5 2017). The event was initially denied by BJP politicians, though it led the RSS chief, even as he called for a national ban on cow slaughter, to condemn violence. But the significance of the issue of cow slaughter for the advance of *Hindutva* is plain. The events surrounding *gau raksha* illustrate, too, "a pattern in which the structured *Hindutva* right – the RSS and the BJP – interfaces with loose society-based outfits" – in this case an organisation such as the Bhartiya Gau Raksha Dal (website: [www.bgrd.in](http://www.bgrd.in)) (Venu 2017). It was unsurprising that amongst the first actions of the new government of Yogi Adityanath in UP was the closing down of so-called illegal slaughterhouses – mainly public municipal slaughterhouses that had been allowed to sink into poor condition – to the detriment of the livelihoods of many, and not only Muslims (Ramdas 2017).

The actions of BJP-run states in regard to cow protection, and *gau raksha* vigilantism – more or less sanctioned by the pronouncements of political and religious leaders – were particularly dramatic ways in which the *Hindutva* agenda was advanced, at the expense of liberal freedoms that are laid down in the Constitution of India. The freedom of religion is certainly at risk. But cow protection activism was not the only way in which constitutional liberties were attacked in the name of 'the nation' as it is defined by majoritarian Hindu nationalists. By 2017 the accusation of 'anti-national' behaviour was used to justify attacks on the freedoms of expression and of association, focusing particularly though not exclusively on Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi – which has the reputation of being both India's best university and a bastion of liberal and left thinking. Early in 2016 the President of the Students' Union at JNU was arrested on the charge of sedition – for having uttered 'antinational' slogans – and subsequently beaten up as he was being taken to court. The row began with a meeting organized by students of which the main purpose was to articulate the grievances of Kashmiris, and which was opposed by students from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student

organization affiliated with the RSS (Internet Desk 2016). A year later ABVP supporters forcibly prevented – as ‘anti-national’ again – the holding of a conference at Ramjas College in Delhi, to which speakers connected with the JNU events had been invited, amidst a lot of violence (there is a chilling interview with an ABVB supporter, who was involved. See Lather 2017).

Meanwhile hate-speech became more common. Rewards were offered, for instance, at different times for the beheading of the communist chief minister of Kerala, and of Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamul Congress, chief minister of West Bengal. A statement such as that by a BJP MLA from UP – to the applause of his audience – that “I promise I will break the hands and legs of any person who doesn’t consider the cow to be mother, or kills a cow, is unwilling to say ‘Vande Mataram’ or isn’t proud to utter nationalistic slogans”, became almost commonplace (reported in *Times of India* 27 March 2017).

The remarkable victory of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh legislative assembly election early in 2017, and the elevation of Yogi Adityanath – with which we began this chapter – marked the ascendancy of majoritarian Hindu nationalism over secular, plural, liberal conceptions of Indian nationhood. Indeed, it appeared increasingly to be the case that Hindu nationalism was pitted as much against those described as India’s secular, liberal or left elites, as against minorities. Ram Madhav, a general secretary of the BJP claimed, “The mob, humble people of the country are behind Modi ... they are enjoying it” (cited by Varshney 2017). Hindu nationalism is both a response to and a protest against liberal elites, and it has little time for the liberal freedoms of expression and association.

## **Authoritarian Populism and the Indian Case**

Ram Madhav’s remark, referring to the ‘humble people of the country’, implicitly pits them against ‘elites’ – a classically populist line of argument, according to which politics is a struggle between the ‘people’ and, on the other side, unfairly advantaged and probably corrupt ‘others’, who may also be defined as racially ‘other’. There are both politically left and right variants of populism. In India, Mrs Indira Gandhi, as prime minister, justified the suspension of India’s democracy, through her declaration of Emergency rule in 1975, with the argument that she was taking control in the face of opposition from a corrupt elite, in order to deliver a broadly

socialist agenda for the benefit of the masses. In 2014, Narendra Modi campaigned in India's general election on a platform that included the claim that he was an outsider to the corrupt, Congress-dominated political elite, and that he would deliver the people from it. Later, in office, he argued that his action in November 2016 in ordering the withdrawal of all Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes from circulation – what was called demonetization, or *notebandi* (see chapter 2) – was directed at undoing a corrupt elite, for the benefit of the people. This line, of moral claims-making, apparently convinced many of 'the people', even those who suffered considerably from demonetization. At the same time, he showed himself increasingly, to be ready to use his electoral majority, implicitly if not explicitly, to condone attacks on minorities, as we have explained above, and to justify attacks on the courts and on the independence of the press (see Varshney 2017). Modi seemed to represent one instance of a much wider trend toward authoritarian populism, defined by Stuart Hall as "a movement towards a dominative and 'authoritarian' form of democratic class politics – paradoxically, apparently rooted in the 'transformism' (Gramsci's term) of populist discontents" (1985: 118).

The context for this, in India as elsewhere in the world, is that of sharply increasing inequality, and of the increasing precariousness of life and work for very many people, including those who think of themselves as being 'middle class' (see chapter 3). In these circumstances there are calls in some countries for more protectionism, supposedly to protect people's jobs; even more generally there are appeals to nativist nationalism (as in the United States, and in the United Kingdom in the call for leaving the European Union); very widely the interests of 'security' are held to trump civil liberties, and – somewhat ironically – the needs of macro-economic stability to require cuts in public expenditure from which poorer people have benefited, for the sake of the 'health' of the national economy. And politicians who present themselves as 'strong men' – or 'authoritarian truth tellers', as Jean Comaroff describes them (2008: 2) – have proven to have electoral appeal. Examples include Shinzo Abe in Japan, Recep Erdogan in Turkey, Donald Trump in the United States, or Vladimir Putin in Russia – and Modi in India (who even went so far as to vaunt his chest measurements whilst campaigning in the 2014 election). Such leaders, who are more or less charismatic, and who encourage personality cults around themselves, are common, even if not essential features of authoritarian populism. As Ian Scoones and his fellow authors have put it:

(Authoritarian populism) justifies interventions in the name of ‘taking back control’ in favour of ‘the people’, returning the nation to ‘greatness’ or ‘health’ after real or imagined degeneration attributed to ‘others’ [old elites, whether they are ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’] ... (and it) ... frequently circumvents, eviscerates or captures democratic institutions, even as it uses them to legitimate its dominance, centralise power and crush or severely limit dissent (Scoones et al. 2017: 3)

This description, though – to an English reader – it clearly bears marks of the debates in the United Kingdom over Brexit, surely applies very well to Narendra Modi. In the Indian case appeals to sectarian religious forces play a further significant, and very dangerous part in the mix.

## Conclusion

We have explained the long history of Hindu nationalism, and the rise of its party political wing to a position of dominance in Indian politics. We cannot predict the future, and we acknowledge that it is perfectly possible that the BJP will lose its majority in the general election that is still more than a year away at the time of this writing. ‘Anti-incumbency’ remains a significant factor in Indian elections, even if there are now several states in which one party has remained in office over several elections (the BJP, for example, in Gujarat, in Madhya Pradesh and in Chhattisgarh, or the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha). The BJP has yet to win strong backing in most of the south of the country, and both nationally and even in a state such as Uttar Pradesh in 2017, it is far from winning a majority of the popular vote (in UP in 2017 the party secured 75 per cent of the seats on the strength of only 40 per cent of the vote). But what we have shown is that Hindu nationalist ideas have by now become commonplace – what we refer to as ‘banal *Hindutva*’ is firmly part of the everyday common-sense of Indian politics. The BJP may lose elections in future but the party – with its partners of the *Sangh Parivar* – has very successfully brought about the conflation of nationalism and *Hindutva* (so that, as Suhas Palshikar [2017] has pointed out, now to be ‘anti-BJP’ is to run the risk of being thought to be ‘anti-national’). Alternative ideas of the nation, and secular liberalism are definitely in retreat before the advance of the specifically Indian form of authoritarian populism. At the same time the BJP, thanks largely to Modi’s inspiration, has very effectively projected the idea of a ‘new India’ that is a land of hope and opportunity, rather than one in which the life chances of most people depend

upon welfare provided by the state. The combination of these sets of ideas is very powerful, to the point of being hegemonic.

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