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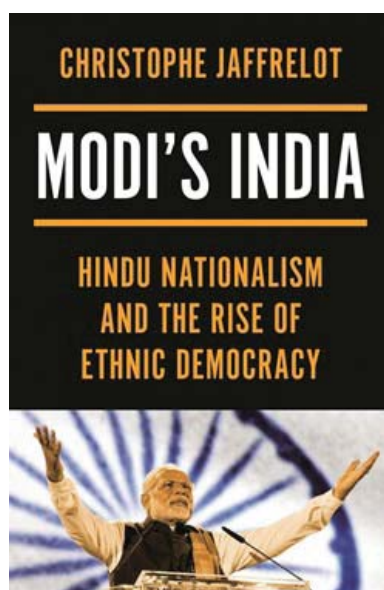
***MODI'S INDIA: HINDU NATIONALISM AND THE RISE OF
ETHNIC DEMOCRACY***

Christophe Jaffrelot (2021).

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In 2024, India's prime minister for the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) Narendra Modi will be able to revalidate a third term, something only done by historic Jawaharlal Neru at the beginning of Indian independence (1950-1964) and his daughter Indira Gandhi, albeit in two different legislatures (1966-1977, 1980-1984). Moreover, both did so while leading the no less historic Indian National Congress, while Modi can do it again at the head of the *Hindutva* BJP.

Since winning the first election in 2014, Modi has propelled India into a major power position beyond regional level, but internally the country is experiencing a great deal of ethnic strife, particularly over measures to deal with Muslims, a minority of hundreds of millions of people in the world's most populous country, with a population of over 1.4 billion. An example of this confrontation was the inauguration in January 2024 of the temple dedicated to Ram in the city of Ayodhya, where Modi took centre stage at the ceremony. A temple under the weight of the controversy of a disputed court ruling sanctioning its construction on the site where in 1992 a mob of *Hindutva* rioted and destroyed the then existing and no less historic Babri Masjid mosque, causing dozens of deaths.

Christophe Jaffrelot's 2021 book analyses in three parts and eleven chapters the rise to power of the ethno-nationalist *Hindutva* movement in India, through the trajectory of Modi himself. A before and after in the country's history. Jaffrelot is a renowned French political scientist specialising in India and Pakistan, professor of South Asian politics and history at the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales (Paris), the King's India Institute (London) and research director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris). Therefore, we are faced with the profuse analysis of a specialist who shows us the end result of meticulous research and exhaustive documentation work.

The first part of the book begins with an introductory chapter in which the author analyses the birth of the *Hindutva* ideology, already very present during the process of India's independence in 1947, although it did not have sufficient support to dispute the power of the secular and more pragmatic Indian National Congress, the protagonist of that independence and of structuring the Indian state, but ultimately incapable of resolving serious internal social, economic and ethnic problems between the different cultures that make up the country. The early *Hindutva* movements of the 1940s and 1950s thus established the idea of the specificity of a unique Indian homeland for Hindus, spiced with a continuous anti-Muslim rhetoric. These movements gradually acquired a doctrinal corpus of widely publicised *Hindutva* authors and, above all, aspired to integrate all Indian Hindu social strata, overcoming caste politics since the importance of the individual was to be subordinated to whether or not he or she was Hindu.

Until the 1960s, Hindu nationalism lacked an organisation that would unite all its ramifications and give rise to charismatic leaders. *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) emerges, a *Hindutva* non-political organisation officially founded in 1925, but lacking in relevance and followers until decades later. Other groups emerged that were persecuted by the Indian National Congress government for their radicalism,

but which eventually came to fruition, such as the BJP itself, founded in 1980 as a new response to the illegalisation of precursor parties; it would draw massively from RSS members above all. One of them would be Narendra Modi. Jaffrelot devotes a second chapter in this initial block to his first period of apprenticeship and rise in the RSS structure. Finally, he rose to media fame when he was elected by the BJP as a gubernatorial candidate in his home state of Gujarat, where he won resoundingly. His mandate includes alleged responsibility for the 2002 ethnic riots, which left dozens dead.

Gujarat was the platform for his candidacy for the BJP in the 2014 general elections. Modi then rolled out a strategy unseen in India, such as his fiery and provocative rhetoric, as well as a continuous presence on social media, always surrounded by young people and bluntly criticising his rivals—especially Congress leaders—as elitist and corrupt. At the same time, an army of *Hindutva* collaborators prevented any criticism of Modi and attacked anyone who did. In the end, this populist and aggressive rhetoric enabled a sweeping victory for Modi and the BJP.

Here Jaffrelot draws attention to a fact. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi can ultimately be blamed for the tools that made the BJP's victory possible. Her policies of absolute control in her own party, Congress, plus the rejection of any alliance with like-minded organisations and, above all, the creation of a single national constituency in India in 1971, were replicated by the BJP: a single leadership and a single discourse, plus the same message for the whole country. Only now this speech and message would be the *Hindutva*, while the undisputed leader would be Modi. In the face of the political and social decline of Congress, the BJP established itself as a party of the future, with a disciplined organisation subordinate to its leadership and with hundreds of thousands of members conscious of its *Hindutva* mission.

Jaffrelot begins the second part of the book by delving into the causes of Modi's victory in 2014. The first is Modi's own projection of a calculated self-image between tradition and modernity, with his publicised interest in technology, social media and even India's space race. This hybrid message resonates in Indian society, where Prime Minister Modi also wants to combine past and present, i.e. not to lose ancestral traditions but also not to renounce the advances and comforts of modernity. Another cause of the predicament is the recipient of the message. According to Modi, Indian society is only Hindu society, which is the majority but not the only one. In his thinking, all other religions, ethnicities and even Hindu politicians who are not religious or are liberal and Western in their outlook, are not India's own.

Modi and the BJP succeeded in neutralising caste divisions as they threatened their project of a unified Hindu nation, not because they fought against the exclusion it entailed. The relationship with the Hindu people is presented as direct and without intermediaries, therefore not responding to opponents, institutions and even less to opposing media with the capacity to mobilise public opinion. Minorities, immigrants or political opponents are portrayed as not belonging to Indian society. A first consequence is the "Hinduisation" of public space, as in the case of the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, marginalising all other sensibilities. The Muslim

community is the main victim of this policy, but also other groups such as Christians, with the BJP authorities calling directly or indirectly for xenophobic demonstrations, sometimes not without violence.

Jaffrelot also takes a closer look at the means that proliferate in Modi's India to control those considered opponents or non-Indians. Surveillance and coercive measures have increased markedly, including lawfare, as evidenced by the leniency towards radical *Hindutva* groups that create disturbances or, equally damaging to democracy, a double standard that rewards the aggressor even when punished in court rulings, something that is increasingly rare. This puts the rule of law itself at risk, as this must also be rejected if it is considered contrary to the Hindu national spirit.

Jaffrelot also analyses how Modi's government has modified the traditional Indian secular postulates that emerged from Congress policies during independence. A welfare state for all is abolished in favour of a so-called "entrepreneurial state" where the population should not ask for any help, but take care of itself, even if it is very poor. Under Modi, the most needy receive benefits and some aid—such as gas connections, the construction of public toilets and housing— but this is presented as an act of charity or a gift from the prime minister and not as an entitlement, even though it is all dressed up in the sacrosanct name of defending the dignity of the poor, and to speak in India of the needy is still synonymous with speaking of millions of people... and voters.

In a third part of the book, Jaffrelot argues that Modi has literally "de-institutionalised" India and changed the rules of the political game. The thought that Indian politics would always be influenced by coalitions and thus follow an inertia that would swing it to the centre was dynamited by Modi's sweeping 2014 triumph and his policies, carried out through a large parliamentary majority with little hindrance from the BJP and its grandiose *Hindutva* proxies.

The author devotes another chapter to the 2019 elections, which Modi also won with a comfortable majority, revalidating his mandate. Jaffrelot calls it pure "electoral authoritarianism" because Modi framed it as a struggle between himself, supported by an effective and well-oiled electoral machinery, and the traditional political castes and dynasties. The *Hindutva* coalition of the BJP won with 45%, but 55% of the vote was against Modi and his allies. Before the elections and for the first time since 1971, the Indian Air Force had bombed Pakistan's border areas, which was a key factor in rallying support for Modi, who was not affected by unemployment, precariousness and poverty rates, especially in rural areas.

Once in power again, in December 2019, an amendment to the country's Citizenship Act endangered Muslims' status as Indian citizens. Thousands demonstrated demanding compliance with the Constitution, the repeal of the amendment and its review by the Indian Supreme Court, but to this day things remain the same and the sword of Damocles hangs over the heads of hundreds of thousands of Muslims in the country.

According to Christophe Jaffrelot, 2019 also marks the definitive consolidation of a *Hindutva* surveillance state in Prime Minister Modi's India. Political opponents

are persecuted and silenced by the use of lawfare against them or harassment by the many members of the BJP and *Hindutva* organisations, who set themselves up as watchdogs and vigilantes in a supposedly just struggle to defend their own positions, which exclude others. Means of repression available to security forces have also been modernised, but above all, managers aligned with the BJP's postulates have been put in charge and therefore suspected of not strictly enforcing the law, which theoretically remains in force and which guarantees equality throughout India, regardless of creed or ethnicity.

In a final chapter, the author looks at the process of marginalisation of the Indian Muslim community, setting out three phases since 2014. The first is where Muslims are marginalised in the social imaginary and expelled from representation in the state, victims of an official negative narrative, which is dangerous because it leads to the justification of certain persecutions. Secondly, political exclusion from public institutions where Muslim representatives—even in large political groups—are ignored and ostracised. This is a more than dangerous exclusion from the democratic political process as this marginalisation in institutions may lead Muslims to seek alternative ways of asserting their rights. The last and current phase is the use of lawfare through court cases that sanction their invisibility in the public life of India, diminish Muslim weight in the history of the country—which is unavoidable but portrayed as an excrescence of a foreign invasion—and legalise what are clearly outrages, such as the court ruling authorising the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque and the construction of the Ram temple.

In short, Jaffrelot presents a highly topical essay on Modi's India, explaining the inner workings of its development as a global power, especially the impact that Narendra Modi had on its future. The book is also a wake-up call, with abundant quotations and profuse documentation, warning how India is becoming a model of ethnic democracy, heading dangerously into the realm of Illiberalism. Over the past two years since the book's publication, political developments have provided further evidence of this setback.

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